

The Rogues Who Went Rogue Chapter 71 - Tips

0 4 minutes read

Tate's heart stopped everytime Stella called him 'dad' around Margaret. The pessimistic part of him thought that Margaret would be angered and tell her daughter to stop acknowledging him like that. But when Margaret said nothing the first time, he felt relieved; the second time, he felt hopeful; the third time, which was now, he felt like the most blessed creature in the world.

He matched Stella's smirk when he said, "Says the one who's trying to converge every conversation with me to only one topic."

"Which topic is that?" Stella questioned.

"You're doing it again."

"I know," Stella chuckled, and as embarrassed as Margaret was, she couldn't help but smile at her daughter's happy face. There was no worry or fear. For once, Margaret saw a cheerful teenager. It was amazing how Tate could give her that.

Stella finally decided to cooperate and started talking about some bushes with small flowers that had white and gold petals being her second favorite part of that place. "What are they called?"

Tate smiled. "Coincidentally, they're estellas."

There was brief silence before Stella accused, "You're lying."

"Why would you say that?" Tate asked with zero humor.

Stella studied Tate's expression, and when she deduced that he may be telling the truth, her brows furrowed when she turned to her mother before addressing her for the first time since they got into the car, "Mom! You told me estellas were blue and black!"

"They are, Stella." Margaret responded in her strict voice, and added, "They were blue and black estellas all around Fleet Wood, and watch how you're talking to me."

Tate decided to butt in, "That flower has many colors. The soil, temperature and overall humidity of this part of lycan territory must be different from those

in Fleet Wood. I'm not sure if they have blue and black estellas here, but white and gold ones seem to grow pretty well in this region."

Stella relaxed and spoke accusatively, "Oh, that's not so bad. For a minute there, I thought mom lied."

Tate sighed in frustration, and threw her disapproving look. "Stella, seriously."

"Fine," her eyes went to her mother through the rear view mirror for a brief moment to mutter, "Sorry."

Tate nodded in satisfaction. "Much better."

It bothered Margaret but impressed her wolf that Tate had better control over her daughter than she did. How did he do it? He didn't have any siblings he had to look after, neither did he mention having any experience with dealing with children or teenagers. How did he know what to say and do to get Stella to behave?

They reached the police station with two minutes to spare, and Stella opted to wait in the car while Tate escorted Margaret in. As soon as they both entered the station where Officer Katie was waiting, Margaret began, "Tate?"

His feet pulled him into an automatic stop, and his soft eyes peered into her hesitant ones as he replied with a wide smile in an affectionate whisper, "Yeah, Mar?"

"Uh..." she glanced at the car outside and then back at him when she asked, "How...How do you get Stella to listen to you?"

Tate's eyes widened in surprise for a moment before he scoffed in amusement and said, "Mar, that teenager doesn't listen to me. She's a teenager. I asked her to go to bed at 9:30, and she kept telling me it was too early."

"9:30 IS too early."

"Hey hey hey. Are you on my side or hers?"

“Sorry. It’s just…” she sighed. “She might not listen to…everything you say, but…I can see that she listens to you more than she does me. Most of the time, I just…don’t know how to reach out to her.”

The helplessness in his mate’s voice squeezed his heart, and he began thinking about what worked so far with Stella before he suggested, “Maybe talk to her about what she loves and ask her why she loves it? She loves taking photos, especially at night. Maybe try to ask to see a few of those the next time you meet her?”

After a moment, she muttered, “I’ll try that.”

They see Officer Katie, who was nice enough to give them a grace period of another minute for Margaret to add, “How did you find out about that hobby of hers though? How did you make her talk?”

“I didn’t,” Tate admitted sheepishly. “Lucy did.”

“The queen?”

“Yeah, she loves children, and is naturally good with pups from every pack. She has a way of making them feel heard and important. For Stella, Lucy just asked her what she liked to do at the dinner table the other night, and your pup just started showing us photos from her phone. I took a leaf out of Lucy’s book, and started talking to Stella about what she liked and hated when it was just the two of us. Before I know it, I’m learning that she could skip firewood duty on her birthdays and doesn’t like rooms with windows because she’s terrified of what she may see if she looks out, like a possible intruder or a fight.”

Margaret didn’t blink when she internalized his words, learning about her own daughter through her mate she just met days ago. Officer Katie gave Tate a signal, and Tate reluctantly nodded her way before assuring Margaret, “Stella knows that you love her, Mar. She knows that you’d do anything to protect her. Getting to know her at a deeper level might be…awkward at first, but once the gears are warmed up, you’d get her talking in no time. She might even grow the guts to ask about you, and when she does…try not to shut her out. Life has not been easy on you, Mar, but Stella shouldn’t have to go through the aftermath of what you had to become to survive and bring her up. You’ve come a long way. Your pup deserves to know the strength you developed throughout your journey. She might even draw inspiration from you one day, you’d never know.”

Margaret's eyes glistened when she responded in a whisper, "I just wanted to protect her from all that I couldn't avoid. I didn't think I was shutting her out."

Tate held her and tried not to make eye-contact with Officer Katie before he pecked a kiss in her hair and muttered, "It doesn't have to stay that way, Mar. We can fix it together, okay?"

Margaret parted their bodies before giving a gentle nod. "I'd like that. Thank you, Tate."

"I'll see you tonight."

Margaret remembered. "Practice with the decipios."

"Yup. Let's hope for the best."

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At around 8 p.m. in Polje, a hundred decipios led by a very excited Rafael join the werewolf and lycan monarch, ministers, warriors and rogues.

Toby muttered in Lucianne's way, "You got to admit, if they weren't on our side, what we're seeing now is sh!t scary."

Lucianne murmured, "Not if you think about what's at stake, how many creatures we have to protect."

Those words shifted Toby's perspective, and the cold night suddenly became less cold.

After exchanging bows and acknowledgments, Rafael and Toby got their species to partner-up, one decipio for every two lycans or werewolves. Rafael then threw out a stern reminder, "As I've mentioned before, we're here to train them to battle with us in their minds while they physically battle with another creature in front of them. It's a practice session. DON'T let them get hurt."

Although Pellethia was there, this was the longest she went without handing out orders, giving her friend full discretion to put things in order. Once Rafael's reminder was issued and the species started pairing up, some reluctantly, Rafael's voice turned polite and more cordial when he faced Lucianne and Xandar and said, "I'm afraid Your Highnesses don't have the privilege of

choosing a partner. As the creatures with the sharpest senses in the kingdom, our recommendation is for you both to train with Pelly and I.”

“That’d be great,” Lucianne responded with a smile.

“Also,” Rafael added in concern, “We plan to push Your Highnesses to your limits, probably to the point where you might have to summon your Authorities. There is a...danger that you might hurt your opponent, so I strongly suggest against practicing with one another.”

Lucianne blinked before she asked, “Wait, wouldn’t you be able to stop us before we did anything? You just told the rest to not let our people hurt each other.”

“And that is very possible for them but not for us, Your Highness. My instructions to the other decipios here are to start from the lowest level – manipulate your people slowly and obviously enough to allow them to familiarize themselves with sensing the walls that a decipio builds up, and fight against being caged in. That basic level of manipulation can be torn down in less than a second, before any harm is caused. You both have a different level of...aptitude and senses. According to the books, Lycan Kings require a collaborative manipulation by a minimum of twenty decipios. Anything less would require them to be of very high caliber, or in the case of Blue Crescent’s attack, they require a chemical to help them enhance their power to control their target. Only an emperor can manipulate the Lycan King alone. I haven’t read anything similar on Lycan Queens, but I doubt it’s very much different, Your Highness.”

Xandar clarified, “So, in essence, because the level of manipulation you’re going to use with us isn’t...basic, it’ll take more time to tear down even if you wanted to.”

Rafael nodded in confirmation. “Yes, Your Highness. The effects take time to fade. Pelly and I can speed it up but we haven’t found or developed a technique to tear it down in an instant as of yet.”

“I see,” Xandar registered.

Pellethia spoke, “So, to keep Aunt Lucy safe, you need someone who you don’t mind...hurting during practice, Uncle Xandar. But try to pick someone

who would also benefit from the practice and not just end up running away and getting hurt all the time, someone who can rival your strength and senses, at least in the very beginning.”

Lucianne’s eyes widened when she realized who was the only creature who ticked all of those boxes. She frantically said, “Those two together are already dangerous without manipulation, Pelly. I really don’t think it’s a good idea. Besides, wouldn’t using me as Xandar’s opponent better train him to fight off the manipulation since he’d never want to hurt me?”

“As logical as that sounds, Aunt Lucy, we mustn’t forget that neither of you have any skills to fight off manipulation effects yet. You WILL hurt each other in the initial stages of practice. And the psychological effects of those who had been touched by a decipio can also be detrimental. If Uncle Xandar continues to hurt you, or if you hurt him to a degree that you both never intended and regret when the effects wear off, it will scar your minds. You both might start holding back during these practice sessions, and it would neither serve you nor the kingdom. We strongly recommend AGAINST practicing with one another.”

Seeing Pellethia and Rafael’s pleading eyes, Xandar took his mate’s hands and pecked a sweet kiss before he said, “Lucy, what happened in Blue Crescent is a nightmare that I wish I could forget. I don’t want to keep hurting you. It’s better if I practiced with Greg.”

After going through her mental library on whatever little she knew about decipios, Lucianne looked at Xandar in dismay and said, “I really hate that I cannot come up with anything to refute the three of you right now.”

Xandar pecked an assuring kiss on her forehead and muttered, “We’ll play nice, baby. I promise.”

Despite the affection in his voice, Lucianne frankly said, “No, you won’t. You both won’t. But what choice do we have?”

Funnily enough, Xandar couldn’t deny that he and Greg were now given the perfect opportunity to tear each other apart.

They got Greg to join them, and Rafael explained that the duke had to be paired with the king for the queen’s safety. Greg’s animal was secretly pleased that they could now use being manipulated as an excuse to harm the cousin they hated, maybe get even for what Xandar did to him at Blue

Crescent. But they also had to weigh in the fact that hurting this dim cousin would also end up hurting Lucianne, so they had to be very selective in how they wanted to get even but still subject Lucianne to as little pain as possible.

When Rafael came to the end of his briefing, Lucianne declared, "If practicing with one another does more harm than good, I'm pairing with Xandar, okay?"

That contingency plan made the cousins' ears perk up. So much for finally having an excuse to harm each other or even out any score by using manipulation as an excuse. The cousins exchanged a worried look as they aborted their mental plan before Xandar assured Lucianne, "You won't have to pair with me, baby. We'll be fine."

Greg affirmed, "We'll behave professionally, My Queen, for the sake of the kingdom." He was going to add 'and for you' but stopped himself from saying the words just in time.

"I really hope so," Lucianne muttered.

Rafael ushered Lucianne towards a large tree, and as they walked away, Xandar asked Pellethia, "Wait, you're training us? I thought we were getting Rafael."

Pellethia scoffed in amusement. "Trust me, Uncle Xandar. You don't want to get Rafael yet. Besides, I'm softer on Aunt Lucy. I'd go easy on her."

As Xandar watched Lucianne speaking to a smiley Rafael, he asked, "Does Rafael have a mate?"

Greg rolled his eyes and Pellethia snapped, "He doesn't. But that doesn't mean he sees Aunt Lucy like that. For Lord's sake, Uncle Xandar, you both are marked! If you don't have faith in every other man out there, at least have faith in Aunt Lucy."

Greg didn't even bother pressing back a smile when he said, "I didn't like the empress at first but I have to say that she is growing on me, cousin."

Xandar muttered, "Let's just start."

They took their positions opposite each other and Pellethia began, "What's going to happen is similar to what happened in Blue Crescent. I'll be building walls, and you both have one of two options, go down the only path I'll be

pushing you towards where you'd have to rely on your animal's senses to detect what's real from what's not, and move from there; or push the walls back while trying to find me, the source."

"Simple enough," Greg muttered.

Pellethia noted, "In theory, yes. In practice, no. I'll start at the most basic level and we'll work our way up from there."

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When they were far away enough, Rafael said, "May I just say that was a game well-played back there, Your High—"

"It's just 'Lucy', Rafael, really. And I wasn't playing anything. Those two cousins hate each other more than anything or anyone. If they don't improve when everyone else does, I WILL be practicing with my husband despite the risks."

Rafael took a peek at his best friend now manipulating the king and duke before he said, "I doubt the king and duke would let that happen, Lucy."

When they reached the tree, Lucianne asked, "So, who am I fighting, Rafael?"

With a warm smile, Rafael said, "Me."

Lucianne's shoulders slumped before she said, "You can't heal like us if I hurt you, Rafael. Are you sure I shouldn't just get one of my warriors?"

"I'm quite certain, Your H— Lucy. And this may sound arrogant but I doubt you'd be able to hurt me tonight."

"Really, why?" Lucianne asked with curious eyes.

"Unlike the rest, we're not starting with wall-building. It'll be too easy for you. I'm going to slither my way in, and we'll start by seeing if you can sense it. Once you do, see if you can differentiate the authentic from the inauthentic. And if you do manage to attack me tonight," he patted on the tree trunk next to them and said, "This is my escape route. My family owned an orchard and I've climbed trees since I was a boy, so I'll be able to climb fast enough for the manipulation effects to wear off from your mind."

Lucianne's relieved eyes went to the tree, then back at Rafael before she admitted, "That actually makes me feel a lot better."

"One more thing, Lucy. If practicing with me alone proves to be...too doable, I'll have to involve Pelly so that the two of us can combine our powers to make it a more productive session for you. Being the Lycan Queen, you should have the ability to fight off the manipulation of a non-vampire ruler, maybe not in the beginning but you will be able to eventually. It's a muscle within you that's probably dormant for now, but it will be active when we start practicing."

Lucianne nodded once before she said, "Alright, let's do it."

With a firm nod of compliance, Rafael's smile faltered, and he began his work. Lucianne didn't realize yet that her mind had already been invaded, because she didn't see Rafael's smile falter.

What she saw was Rafael taking his position before she heard the snarl of two proditors appearing from the tree. One landed right on top of Rafael, and Lucianne heard his bones break before he gr0aned in pain as he was kicked to the side.

The other proditor landed perfectly on the ground next to his friend, and they both glowered at Lucianne. She took a quick look around and realized that the proditors were invading Polje. Her people and the decipios on their side were already trying to fight them off.

Lucianne reflexively charged at the ones in front of her after sizing them up. When she saw the one on the right throwing his body forward, intending to make her fall, she abruptly stepped back and let him fall to the ground before the proditor on the left charged forward and tried to land a few blows in her face, which she easily dodged before her claws extended as her claws plunged through its arm, earning a deafening shriek. Lucianne then plunged her claws through his body and kicked him to the side like how its friend kicked Rafael earlier.

The one whom she made fall earlier charged at her again. As Lucianne dodged his attacks, she tried to guess what their abilities were. Neither of them would be a discretus or they both would've been invisible to ease their attack. Not a velox because their attacking speed was too slow. Definitely not a fortis with how easy it was to destabilize them just by a simple kick in their

c.hest. Plus, it was odd that when her claws went through, it felt...light, like she was attacking thin air. Decipios? But if they were decipios, why weren't they attacking her mind?

And then the truth hit her, maybe they were already in her mind.

As she dodged attacks, she realized that she didn't detect any strong smell of chrysanthemum and pine leaves. In fact, those scents were faint, meaning that they were a short distance away. After her claws went through the proditor's c.hest and she watched him fall to the ground, she began focusing on her other senses apart from sight.

Her nose told her that there was only one vampire within her vicinity, and her ears could hear the two on the ground gr0aning and struggling with their wounds. Her animal prompted her human part to close off anything they're seeing and hearing, concentrating fully on their noses.

When she was trying to trace the only vampire she could smell, she heard more snarls and found herself being surrounded by more than ten proditors, who were pacing towards her in slow steps. Most had bl00d on their faces, which made Lucianne automatically conclude that some of her people were already dead. That very thought threw her off-course from her scent-tracing effort as regret and blame started engulfing her.

Her animal thought differently. She was still focusing on scents, and when it still smelled only one vampire, it made its human part aware of that. Lucianne wiped away her tears and lowered herself to pick up the rock by her foot, letting her animal pinpoint the one they were really after.

What was worrying was that Lucianne then started smelling more than one vampire, which was beginning to confuse her animal. But the problem was that the other vampires seemed to be further away than where they now stood. And she was even beginning to smell wolves and lycans even though she was seeing none.

It was getting more confusing by the second. Still, her lycan somehow...felt that the closest vampire was their target. After agreeing with her animal that the closest one was at their seven o'clock, Lucianne swiftly turned and threw the rock with great force in that direction. The rock flew through the air and fell on the ground.

Lucianne thought she made a mistake, until she realized that the proditors that were surrounding her had vanished. But she still smelled vampires. Instead of feeling confused, she was getting frustrated. But right before she growled into the emptiness out of pure rage and annoyance, her vision started seeing what was real.

Rafael was at the very spot where she threw the rock, and he was tossing the rock with his left hand with a wide smile as he waited for the manipulation effects to wear off. Lucianne stubbornly tried to hasten getting rid of the effects by shaking her head. Then she started remembering what really happened.

She remembered that Rafael was never harmed, and there were no proditors, so she was actually avoiding and attacking the night air. Her animal covered its face in embarrassment at how it now looked.

Lucianne started smelling more vampires, lycans and werewolves because her friends and the vampires they paired up with were taking a break, and decided to come see how Lucianne was faring since their decipio partners told them that their queen's training was different. Rafael made sure they stood a considerable distance away for tonight, not wanting to add that type of confusion at this stage yet.

When she threw the rock, Rafael caught it with an awestruck expression. The rock never landed on the ground like she was manipulated into believing. And finally, she remembered how everyone around her gasped and wowed when she threw the rock directly at Rafael.

When reality came back to her, her bright, relieved eyes met Rafael's still-amazed ones when he said, "That was bloody well done, Lucy."

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As Xandar took steps towards his wife with a proud smile, Toby's voice of mock discontentment cut through the silence, "You got to admit, that wasn't really fair. Lucy had a rock nearby. I didn't."

His vampire partner, Joseph, turned to him and said, "You did, Tobias. You tripped over it."

When laughter ensued from wolves, lycans and vampires, Toby accused, "That was only because you manipulated me into thinking that there wasn't anything there, Joe."

"No, I didn't. I was only trying to manipulate you to see your friend, Lovelace, as your enemy. The absence of a rock was the result of your self-manipulation, minister."

When Toby ran out of arguments while everyone around him laughed, he looked at his best friend whose mate now wrapped his arms around her abdomen and shoulders from behind as the defense minister declared, "I've grown a sudden hate for walls, Lucy."

As her indecent beast took in her scent from her hair, Lucianne argued, "At least you could feel the walls, Toby. I didn't even know the manipulation started taking effect until after I killed two imaginary proditors. I was literally fighting nothing."

All contemplative eyes turned to Rafael, who looked at his own best friend and scratched his nape as he admitted, "Perhaps I entered a little too quickly for first practice."

Christian then said, "No no no no no. Rafael, that's not the point...well, not my point at least. The question is: you can create a creature out of...nothing?"

"Every decipio here can do that, Your Grace."

Some of the werewolves and lycans even cursed under their breath before quickly apologizing to their decipio partner. Zelena asked, "Why would you want your victims to fight nothing? I thought the whole purpose of manipulation was to make your enemies fight each other."

Rafael explained, "That is the endgame, yes. But we can't deny that, sometimes, when our enemy is charging towards us, there may be no one between us and them. So, creating an illusionary creature between the two sides buys us time to escape, maybe even attack."

Toby nodded in understanding and said, "That's actually pretty clever." His objective compliment made the decipios so proud of themselves and their abilities that most, if not all of them, smiled without effort.

Xandar then asked, “For comparison’s sake, Rafael, is it easier to create something out of nothing, or change how a creature sees another creature?”

Rafael answered without hesitation, “Creation takes more effort and skill, Your Highness. We’d have to quickly pull out information from your mental archives to understand what you’re prone to find true. Then, we’d have to conjure up what the imaginary creatures would look like and how they’d react to threats and attacks. If we’re merely changing the physical aspects of another creature in our victims’ minds, we wouldn’t have to think about how they would react to our victims’ attacks since the reaction comes from the actual creature that our victim is made to fight in real life. It really is much simpler.”

As everyone processed this, Rafael added, “But creation takes decades of practice to perfect, and even then, it requires a certain level of concentration during execution...and proximity to the victim, of course. So decipios can’t have someone attacking us while we’re creating something out of thin air. Any level of distraction would tamper with the authenticity of that sort of manipulation. Personally, when I’m distracted, the...thin-air-manipulation I create would be...unrealistic, such as the sounds that should be louder come out illogically softer. I mean, you won’t have a ready-to-attack creature standing right in front of you snarl so soft that you start suspecting he’s having a sore throat.”

Toby shrugged like he didn’t mind before he mumbled, “I’d probably laugh at him before I fight him.”

After replaying the Blue Crescent attack, Greg said, “I suppose we should count ourselves lucky the decipios from the other day didn’t forge something out of thin air.”

Rafael then explained, “And that could be for two reasons, Your Grace. One, they can’t do it for lack of skill, which would be good news for us; two, the fact that they were being chased and attacked didn’t offer them the luxury to focus on doing something like that.”

Greg uttered the thought running through everyone’s minds, “Let’s hope it’s the former.”

Greg was usually open to new challenges and 'worthy opponents' but this was not something that he'd want a challenge in simply because he knew close to nothing about how to keep the people he cared about safe yet.

When no one else had anymore questions, everyone got back to practice. Rafael slither his way into Lucianne's mind exaggeratingly slowly this time. Even then, Lucianne still couldn't feel him in the first three intrusions.

Greg and Xandar didn't hold back. In the manipulation, Greg saw Tanner, sometimes Livia. Xandar either saw rogues, the Kyltons or Sasha Cummings. They both acted on instinct and attacked each other as soon as the manipulation took effect in their first two rounds, never bothering to fight back the mental walls that pushed them towards an illusion. After that, however, the cousins started noticing illogicalities in the illusions.

When they attacked, their opponent appeared more ferocious than the actual person would, so Greg was seeing a ready-to-kill Livia or Tanner when in reality, they'd cower when he was about to attack. Xandar noticed the same thing with the Kyltons and Sasha Cummings. The rogues were a little trickier for him since those in reality had always appeared fierce.

What was different, Xandar realized when he circled a hand around Greg's neck and lifted him off the ground, was that he smelled his cousin. Sure, he hated the guy but his animal somehow knew that killing and hurting Greg was not on its to-do-list. As they practiced one round after another, they'd even throw in reluctant apologies if they did end up hurting one another, so it was mostly Xandar apologizing to Greg after the manipulation effects wore off.

In their sixth round, they started trying to push back the mental walls. Greg got so frustrated at one point that he cursed 'f*ck this sh!t' and summoned his animal's strength to punch through the mental wall with his fist, and the thin wall Pellethia created shattered like glass.

The effects wore off, and the empress looked at the duke with a congratulatory smile and said, "That was very creative, Your Grace. But know that strength will only work with thin walls and very untrained decipios. In the end, awareness of a decipio's intrusion will still triumph, so reliance on your animal's senses remains a must-mastered skill."

"Yeah, I just got sick of it," Greg muttered frankly.

Pellethia smirked. "I can tell. We should take a break."

The empress went to watch another pair while Xandar and Greg lay flat on the ground, mentally drained. Xandar suddenly asked, “Why is it that our human and animal instincts combined still trust what we see more than what we smell or know?”

Greg pinched the bridge of his nose and answered, “Basic science, cousin. Light travels faster than anything. Sight is our ‘quickest’ sense in detecting stimulus, so to speak. The rest of our senses take a little more time to catch up.” He then closed his eyes to find some peace from his cousin.

Xandar looked past the condescending way Greg was replying, and he thought out loud, “That means...when we’re in the presence with decipios, it’s better to start off with our eyes closed.”

Greg’s closed eyes snapped wide open. That was actually not a stupid idea. But the question was how long should their eyes be closed?

Xandar then elaborated, “If we memorized the scents of our followers and allies, which our animals have already been doing all this time, any foreign scent would be the enemy, then no matter what or who we see, we’d know it’s safe to kill.”

The duke sat up in silence as he tried to find loopholes in Xandar’s reasoning. When silence ensued, Xandar sat up, which was when Greg murmured, “It’s good to know that a glimmer of light is appearing from your dimness, cousin. I credit the queen for that improvement. Let’s get the empress. We should start putting our theory to the test.”

Xandar protested, “Our theory? I thought of that whole thing, Greg.”

“After I told you about how quickly our eyes detect stimuli. I get points, too.”

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Xandar and Greg shared their thoughts with Pellethia, who was more than ready to see it in action. Practice began. When they felt the mental walls beginning to build up, both cousins closed their darkening eyes, letting the manipulation guide them towards the illusion they were being made to see. Pellethia moved from her original spot, walking around them but being careful to manipulate the cousins’ hearing so that they couldn’t hear her footsteps.

Without sight, Xandar and his animal could only rely on their sense of smell, sound and touch. Their ears picked up growls from at least ten creatures, but their nose only detected two creatures within his vicinity. One was moving. One wasn't.

Greg only heard one snarling creature, but it didn't sound like a wolf or lycan, more like a vampire. Scents guided him to a different conclusion – there were two creatures, one who smelled like a vampire was moving in slow paces somewhere behind him, one who smelled like a lycan was not far in front of him.

Xandar opened his eyes, and was made to think he was in a random wolf pack. The imaginary wolves snarling at him were vivid, and the manipulation influenced him to believe that they had killed Lucianne and a few of the alliance members. Anger and guilt flood his being. His tampered thoughts pinned the one in front of him as the leader, who looked unusually large for a wolf.

His claws extended but right before he attacked, his lycan concluded that the scent of the so-called leader matched Greg. They stood in their spot and got thinking before finally coming to the revelation that Lucianne couldn't be dead. Their mate-bond was still intact. He could feel that she was alive. He didn't even feel her enduring any form of pain, neither was she scared. She just felt...curious, and maybe a little frustrated. She was safe. He just didn't know where she was.

Greg's tampered thoughts told him that he had entered a bad bargain with an anonymous business associate who turned out to be a vampire, and was now threatening to kill all his followers after finishing him off. This was a duel, and whoever won had the right to kill the other's followers. He emitted a low growl as he shifted into his brown-furred animal, ready for the fight.

Greg charged at Xandar, and Xandar avoided his attack, letting his cousin fall onto the ground as he yelled, "Greg! Snap out of it!"

But what the duke heard was, "That's the best you got?"

Greg growled louder and fiercer. Greg's claws extended and he started trying to plunge them into Xandar. Xandar continued trying to yell some sense into the duke but to no avail.

Greg tripped Xandar and the king fell on his back. Before the duke's claws went through the king's chest, Pellethia wiped off the manipulation effects. At the same time, Xandar kicked Greg with force at his abdomen, and the duke flew towards Pellethia, who reflexively took quick steps back as she exclaimed, "GAH!"

Some of her people dashed to her but she shoed them back to practice after ensuring them that she was okay. Octavia felt her shock and immediately linked her from the castle study, asking her what was going on.

Once reality welcomed the king and duke, Xandar took quick, relieved breaths as he got up. Greg sat up as he tried to process and accept how misguided he had been to not trust what he smelled. He had to admit that the manipulation was top notch.

The empress somehow knew his weakness...well, one of the main ones. His number one weakness was Lucianne and his people, who were equally important and irreplaceable to him. His second weakness was his ego. In the rogue world, he didn't like being fooled or challenged. If he were challenged, he'd like to win. The Kyltons fooled and challenged him, and look where that got them.

His ego to win the fictional duel and preserve his status made him blindsided to the fact that the scent of his opponent was familiar. If he gave himself a little more time to identify the scent, he would've easily concluded that it was his cousin. He and his animal deduced that they had to prioritize scents over ego and pride, at least in such battles.

Xandar reached Greg and Pellethia, and the king's voice held a hint of concern when he asked, "Are you alright?"

"Fine, cousin," Greg muttered.

Xandar's brows raised in surprise, and he looked at his cousin still seated on the grass as he said, "I was talking to the empress but...I'm glad you're okay too, Greg."

He patted his cousin on the shoulder once as he tried to press back a teasing smile. Greg sensed Xandar's humor from his energy, and it made the animal in his head growl.

Pellethia's eyes sparkled when she said, "That was amazing, Uncle Xandar! How did you do it?"

Xandar shrugged with a smile, "I trusted the scents more than what I saw. It really is better to start off with our eyes closed but I'm not sure if we'll have the luxury of time during battle."

Greg stood from his spot and questioned in annoyance, "Were you even trying to defend yourself, cousin?"

"Why else would I be backing away from you when you attacked?"

"And YOU didn't attack! I could have killed you."

"No. I wouldn't have let that happen, which is why I kicked you away. Didn't you smell me?"

Greg swallowed his pride and admitted, "With hindsight, I did. I just..."

After an awkward and embarrassed pause, Xandar finished for him, "Didn't focus on the scent long enough to match it to me?"

"You could say that," Greg murmured. There was something about the decipios' power that was really beginning to bother him, so he turned to Pellethia and asked, "Do you see what we see? Do decipios like you see the manipulation?"

"To a certain extent, we do."

"What the hell does that mean?"

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0 6 minutes read

"Greg," Xandar uttered in disapproval of the duke's manner of speaking to Pellethia.

Pellethia's brows raised, waiting for him to rephrase. Greg took this as a start to practice lowering his ego and swallowing his pride when he heaved a sigh and muttered, "May I know what that means?"

Pellethia began explaining, “It means that we see the number of figures and objects around you, but we don’t see who or what these are.”

“Really?” Xandar asked in absolute surprise.

Pellethia nodded in confirmation and elaborated, “Take our recent practice, for example. I knew the number of creatures I’ve set around you both but I don’t know who they were or what they looked like.”

Greg asked, “How do you know who to use if you can’t see who you were using?”

Pellethia took a moment to ponder on how to explain the manipulation process in a manner that a non-decipio could understand, and she began, “Think of your minds as compartments. Each compartment is an aspect of you or your lives – love, fear, resentment, pride, and every other aspect. When we invade the general archives of your minds, we normally pull out only one specific material to deceive what you see. Stronger decipios can pull out more than one at a time. My personal record is eight. Rafael’s is ten. As great as that sounds, it’s actually not that mind-blowing if you explore the intricacies of our ability. How do I put this...uh...”

“When we pull out a specific material, we know that it will affect you, but we don’t see the creature affecting you. We can guess what or who it is but it will just be that, a guess. If the point of the manipulation is to scare you, I’d pick out your fear archive and take the most extreme one to bring to life. If, hypothetically speaking, it’s a spider, then I myself can see the outline of the spider but I won’t see the finer details like color, the ferocity in its eyes, those kinds of fine features.”

“What about sounds, Pelly?” Xandar asked.

“That’s also from your own archives, Uncle Xandar. You see, for it to be...real, it has to be something that you’ve heard before or at least something that you’ve imagined hearing, so that it’s easier to convince you. Even when we create thin-air manipulation, I can increase or decrease the volume and pitch based on logic but I really don’t hear what you hear.”

Greg muttered, “That’s a relief to know.”

Pellethia replied, “I agree. Invasion of privacy can be disturbing, not to mention wrong if our power is abused.”

After giving some thought to how little the lycans and werewolves knew about vampires, Xandar found himself mumbling, "I've got to get Yarrington to stock up on vampire material in our territory."

"Uncle Lucas should have done that centuries ago," Greg uttered in dissatisfaction despite talking about his favorite royal family member.

Pellethia glanced at Lucianne and Rafael before she commented, "I'm surprised Aunt Lucy hasn't read anything about this. I wonder what's in the libraries and bookstores of lycan territory these days."

Xandar sheepishly said, "Mostly about our history and feuds, written and edited to villainize vampires. We've taken back textbooks from schools to be rewritten a couple of months ago, so those would show differently by the end of this year or the next, at the latest. There are a few books on your species's biology but not a lot. Lucy has only three of them, and she said it was pretty much the same thing, nothing as in-depth as what you just told us."

Pellethia listened attentively and responded, "Looks like your education minister and ours have to discuss business once this ends, Uncle Xandar."

As Xandar nodded with a smile, Greg murmured in agreement, "That's long overdue."

###

After Xandar, Greg and Pellethia shared what they had learned with everyone else – to close their eyes and trust their noses. The two cousins attracted lots of shocked and surprised looks, apart from a few gaping mouths.

Christian, Toby, Lucianne and Greg's top four couldn't believe their ears when they heard that those two actually worked together and came up with that analysis and observation. Despite everyone's disbelief, they got back to practice to try out the newly-developed technique.

Close to the edge of Polje, Phelton requested for a break and when Zeke started asking the decipio, Brienna about how he saw the mental walls as mirrors, Phelton made his way towards the rogue wolf he found attractive the other day on the jet. She sat a notable distance away from her wolf and decipio partner who were taking a break, scrolling through her phone.

He dropped down next to her, which made her instinctively hold her phone closer to her chest as she leaned away, even shifting more to the side to create a larger distance than the one Phelton left.

“Kate, right?” Phelton began.

“Yeah,” she responded suspiciously.

“I’m Phelton.”

“I know. What did I do?”

“I just...wanted to talk to you.”

“About what?”

Phelton didn’t think of that. He shrugged and said, “Anything, actually.”

Registering Kate’s blank, annoyed look, Phelton chose to add, “Well, we could start with how you became a rogue?”

Kate’s eyes turned defensive as she snapped, “That’s personal. It’s not part of the deal so I don’t have to say anything.”

“I’m not speaking on behalf of the government, Kate. I just want to know you.”

Frustrated now, Kate asked, “Why?”

Phelton didn’t even need to think before he uttered, “You seem like something special.”

Kate blinked when realization dawned on her at where this was going. She stood, making Phelton panic internally as he followed suit. She then said, “I’m flattered, minister, but not interested.”

“Kate, I’m not playing you. This isn’t some manipulative scheme to get you t—”

“I’m not saying that it is. I’m just not interested.”

“Why?” Phelton asked with furrowed brows.

“You’re not my type, and I’m already with someone else.”

Phelton's voice took an angered and possessive twist when he asked, "Who?"

"That's none of your business, minister. All you need to do is respect my choice and never bring this up again."

Right after saying that, Kate walked away, internally relieved that Phelton didn't demand she showed him whatever was on her screen.

Phelton imagined a ton of scenarios on how that would play out before he spoke to Kate, but it had never crossed his mind that she'd say she was with someone else. He had been stealing glances of her since the day on the jet, then at Blue Crescent before the proditors attacked. He couldn't deny that she was careful not to return his gaze but that didn't stop him from trying to protect her when he noticed that her arm was being pulled by something none of them could see.

During that attack, Phelton charged at the emptiness next to Kate and successfully tore the discretus away from her before he was nicked twice in the back by another two discretus that no one saw coming. He passed out and woke up in Blue Crescent's pack clinic hours later, and the first thing he asked the doctor about was Kate. He was relieved to learn that she wasn't in the clinic with them, but was sad that he couldn't see her until he returned with the others to lycan territory.

Tonight, Phelton genuinely thought he'd have a shot at getting Kate to open up. He wondered if he was being insincere and demanding by expecting a simple thank you for what he did to save her from the venom that could've put her in a coma.

How was it possible that she was with someone else? In the numerous times he stole a glance, Phelton had never seen another male or female look at her with interest or affection, neither did she look at anyone that way. Perhaps her lover was of a different rogue pack? If that were the case, Phelton thanked Goddess that she and her lover were separated for the time being. He doubted whoever Kate was seeing was her bonded mate. If it were, she would have said so because it would have been a sure way to keep Phelton away.

Perhaps Kate was lying. Maybe, just maybe, she wasn't actually seeing anyone, and she said what she did to keep him away. Did she declare she was not interested because he was a loyal deputy minister or because she really wasn't interested?

Phelton replayed their exchange, and had to come to the upsetting conclusion that it was the latter. There was not the slightest shred of interest or desire in her eyes. He'd seen two people in love before, either thanks to the mate-bond or by choice. The way two creatures who were in love looked at each other were different. One could easily see a connection that amplified when they were together. Kate showed nothing close to that with him.

"Phelton! Ready for another round?" Zeke's voice pulled the deputy minister out of his thoughts, and he jogged towards them to resume practice, but not after stealing another glance of Kate.

Neither Kate nor Phelton knew that Hailey watched their whole exchange. She and the other royal rogues didn't have to be reminded about their unspoken duty to always be alert and on their guard wherever they were. From her extensive experience of watch duty under Greg Claw, she could easily tell that Kate was hiding something.

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07 minutes read

The mental practice with the decipios drained the lycans and wolves, who were all obviously unfamiliar with their power, and most of them slept in the next day. Lucianne and Xandar only woke up when Reida demanded diaper changes and feeding, and the parents were utterly (and guiltily) relieved that Mrs Parker was coming at noon to babysit. They'd have a few more hours of rest while Reida was in the caretaker's safe hands.

After a short nap, Lucianne went to her reading wonderland and started reading one of Iridessa's two theses on prisoner reentry, which Ivory handed to her before they parted ways the previous night. She only left the bedroom for ten minutes before her husband came looking for her.

It took Xandar zero brain power to figure out where she had gone. He groaned at the emptiness of the bed and dragged his groggy self from their room to the library before dropping chest-down on the couch where she sat as he hugged her thighs and continued his nap. Lucianne's hand instinctively went to his hair and her thumb started stroking his thick locks. His animal was put into deeper slumber as Lucianne continued reading the insanely-organized and detailed thesis.

A large part of her found it unfair that it was turned down. There was so much in there that a lay person didn't know about. There were viable solutions,

substantiating evidence taken from the past and from other species, precautions and back-up plans if something didn't work.

She went through only a quarter of the document before she had to put it on the side table to take a break. As Lucianne sipped earl grey from the white mug that Xandar bought for her on their honeymoon, which had the words 'Shh...I'm reading' in big, black font, she pondered on whatever she had just read, and started wondering how there was more.

As she stroked Xandar's locks and listened to his steady breathing, she couldn't help but feel guilty that former convicts had never crossed her mind when they were discussing the kingdom's affairs. It almost felt like the governing body didn't know they existed, or didn't want to acknowledge their existence.

It also made her feel that Greg was better than any of them in government were. He protected and looked after the people who were shunned by the kingdom, giving them a second chance that was never offered because of one mistake.

Objectively-speaking, not all of those crimes could be labeled as mistakes. Negligence qualified, but crimes like defrauding abusive employers or setting a mate on fire did not, because none of these were done by accident. Of course, there were also those who harmed and stole without good intentions. It was complicated.

Was that why it was easier to just put all of them in the same jar? A jar that was sealed so tightly that redemption was never opened to any creature that was put in there? She started wondering whether any rogue lycans from Wu Bi Corp suffered the same misfortune, and prayed that those who went there failed the vetting session with her cousin-in-law (if there was one) before joining the corporation.

She put down her steaming mug and got back to reading, admittedly terrified of turning to the next page to learn more about how second chances could have been given but weren't done so.

An hour later, Xandar woke up from his nap when Lucianne was halfway through Iridessa's thesis. The yellow highlighter in her hand brushed over another line before Lucianne placed the cap back on, and her hand returned to her indecent beast's hair. Despite knowing that he was already awake, her

thumb continuously stroked his thick, brown locks and Xandar's eyelids closed once more to indulge in her soft touch while his animal cooed in tenderness.

When the mental fatigue returned, Lucianne heaved a soft sigh and placed the thesis on the table. As soon as she did, Xandar pulled her body downwards and made her lie on her side. His hands gently pushed up her shirt to reveal her bare tummy. He could still see his claws going right through the now perfect-looking skin. His guilt and anger returned as he pressed a deep kiss on the area.

Lucianne continued stroking his hair and whispered a stream of soft 'I love you' as he hugged her abdomen. He and his animal pressed their mate close to themselves, channeling the depth of their love for Lucianne through their bond, which she and her animal reciprocated in equal strength. After a few minutes, he pulled her shirt back down and moved up to bury his face in her chest, listening to her steady heartbeat as he took in her scent.

When Xandar felt better, Lucianne suddenly said, "I wonder if the vigils are okay. We haven't heard anything from Pelly yet."

"Mm...sure they're fine," Xandar muttered as he snuggled into her breasts.

After another short moment of silently enjoying each other's company, Lucianne tried to get up when she said, "I'm just going to check on Reida."

Xandar groaned and tightened his grip around her body, refusing to let her go when he said, "Our daughter is with Mrs Parker, babe. She's fine. Just...stop moving."

"I haven't moved in the past hour, Xandar."

"So what's a few minutes more?"

After trying but failing to escape his grip, Lucianne said, "You're a little clingy, darling. You know that?"

She felt his lips at her breasts curl up when he muttered, "Can you blame me? I waited 178 years to meet you. You made me wait this long. It's your fault that I'm clingy."

“No, my love. Being clingy is one’s own choice. If you’re like this when I simply want to see our daughter, imagine how you’d be if and when we have a son.”

Xandar chuckled lightly before pulling himself up to plant a kiss on her neck, lips and forehead. He then declared, “I like the daycare centre idea you shared with me on our date about nine months back. I wonder if there’s also a...nightcare centre.”

With fierce eyes that turned-up Xandar’s amusement, Lucianne said, “I was being sarcastic, Xandar.”

He chuckled and pecked a kiss between her eyebrows before he surrendered, “I know, babe. I was just joking. Relax.”

He planted another kiss on her hair and felt her remaining rage evaporate before his lilac eyes peered into her black-and-lilac orbs as he whispered, “How about we spend a few hours together this weekend, just the two of us? We haven’t gone on a date since our honeymoon.”

Despite her flushing cheeks, Lucianne’s eyes narrowed in suspicion as she asked, “Christian gave you the idea, didn’t he?”

Xandar smiled wider and his fingers began tracing her blushes as he said, “Something like that. In the eighteen years he and Annie were married, he’d make time at least once a week to just spend some time being with her, talking to her. He said it makes him fall even more in love with Annie everytime they do that. It’s once a fortnight now that they have Lewis and Lucianne but they still do it.”

The tip of his nose gently nudged Lucianne’s nose when he continued, “I don’t know how it’ll be possible to be more in love with you than I am now, but I do want to spend more time with you.”

Lucianne’s smile continued to broaden with each word, and her thumb stroked his lower lip when she whispered, “If I don’t say ‘yes’, would you still try to seduce me?”

Xandar’s soft features turned flirtatious when he turned their bodies so that she laid flat on her back while he hovered over her. His lips attacked her neck without warning, and she angled her head to the side to give him full access as she moaned in ecstasy.

Their skins heated up and when she whispered his name, he licked and sucked on her mark that made her body arch towards his. His hardened tool was pressed against her slightly wet area, and the only boundary left was their shorts.

Xandar glued their bodies together as his lips moved up to her ear, where he sucked on her earlobe before muttering in a seductive whisper, "Say yes, baby." A soft kiss on her earlobe before he repeated, "Say yes."

Her dazed eyes were fixed on the most amazing, handsome, loving, romantic, patient, supportive and understanding creature in existence, and it was moments like this that she couldn't thank the Moon Goddess enough for giving her the jackpot of a mate after all the heartbreaks and disappointments.

Registering her silence, Xandar smirked and spoke in a deep voice, "You're making me up my game, aren't you, my little freesia?"

He planted kisses on her cheek and jawline before pressing his lips against hers, licking the inner walls of her mouth and her tongue as he linked, 'Still not a yes, baby?'

Lucianne moaned unintelligibly as Xandar continued building on his efforts, now even squeezing her bum. When Lucianne broke away for air, Xandar hid his face in her neck and pecked a trail of butterfly kisses until he reached her collarbone.

After Lucianne caught her breath, Xandar's nose nudged hers again, and she cupped his cheeks as her blissful eyes peered into his before she whispered, "I love you."

His radiant smile spoke for his happiness when he replied, "I love you too, Lucy. But that is still not a 'yes'."

Lucianne's phone rang, and she reflexively pushed Xandar off before trying to get up to reach for it. Xandar pinned her back down with his weight and said, "C'mon, baby. Just say 'yes'."

She bit her bottom lip, trying but failing to hold back the shy smile as she pointed out the obvious, "I was already going to say 'yes' when you first asked. Now, get off, My King. That could be important."

Xandar chuckled and reached for the phone before handing it to her. He buried his face in her chest again when Lucianne answered the incoming call from Tate. She remembered that he and Stella were out visiting Margaret, and assumed that he was passing on a message from the police force before taking Stella out for a trip to another park to take pictures.

Before Lucianne could say a single word, Tate's grim voice came through, "Lucy, Margaret predicted a possible attack in Polje tonight."

Tate couldn't get her through the mind-link because Lucianne blocked it out when she and Xandar were having their private moment, so Tate had to resort to calling her instead.

Xandar heard what Tate said, and his defensive eyes snapped up to meet his mate's hardened features when she said, "Tell Toby, Phelton, Langford and Dalloway about this. Xandar and I will let their Imperial Majesties know and we'll request for back-up. See you tonight."

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06 minutes read

It wasn't really 'tonight' for anyone. Everyone was at Polje by late evening. The sunset off the horizon would've been a breathtaking sight if it weren't for the fact that the lycans, werewolves and vampires were there because of Margaret's vision. She saw fire and heard growls, but thankfully, no blood or anguished howls like the last time.

Octavia and Amber came tonight, along with a few other discretus and fortis. Octavia's eyes and those of the other ten discretus they brought along roamed the surroundings, scanning for proditors.

When they did this for a good fifteen minutes but saw nothing, the discretus asked their wolf and lycan counterparts whether they were hearing or smelling anything. None of them did, not even Xandar with the sharpest hearing or Lucianne with the sharpest sense of smell.

Most of them didn't doubt Margaret's vision at first since it proved to be terrifyingly accurate about the Blue Crescent attack. But after an hour in which half of the time was nightfall, some started to look at Margaret in suspicion, wondering if she was pulling their leg. Tate was beginning to glare at anyone who was looking at Margaret in disdain, which was mostly the royal rogues.

Lucianne saw it, too. She then clapped her hands once to get everyone's attention before making a suggestion, "How about half of us resume practice while the other half of us stand guard? We'll take turns. An hour of practice for the first batch, and then an hour with the second batch."

Desmond was the first to shrug like it was no big deal when he said, "Better than w'all standing 'round doin' nothin'. Yo, Zane! What d'ya wanna do first?"

Greg's animal was scratching its face at Desmond's casualness before the duke's hand went for the Money Retriever's nape as he delivered a stern, shivering reminder, "After the queen finishes speaking, we place an arm across our chest as a sign of loyalty and say the standard words of 'As you wish, My Queen' as a demonstration of obedience. Is that understood, Desmond?"

Desmond nodded without needing to think. He might have been afraid of the way Greg looked at him with that partially-onyx glare, but the follower was more afraid of disappointing the very creature who helped him stand on his feet again than he was of the warning.

Lucianne's voice then rang through the space, "Greg, let him go. Desmond did nothing wrong." She then turned back to everyone else and said, "The ministers and royal family members will stand guard with the discretus first. Warriors and..."

It was on the tip of Lucianne's tongue to say 'rogues', but the word didn't feel right after she read half of Iridessa's thesis, so she thought fast and chose to say, "...mavericks," her own animal was covering its face in embarrassment for its human part but Lucianne pushed through, "Train first. We'll swap after an hour."

The queen quickly turned and jogged towards a random spot to guard, not wanting to see any weird looks that may be thrown at her for her lame choice of word. She really should have thought that through before opening her mouth. What Lucianne didn't know was that the word 'maverick' made the rogues who understood the word feel better about themselves.

When Desmond saw that the queen had left the circle and he didn't need to be all nice and polite around the king, he looked at his boss and said, "That's a cool word, boss. Ain't know what it means though."

Greg's smile was getting broader by the second, and he allowed himself another two-second look at Lucianne's retreating figure before he answered Desmond, "Mavericks are unorthodox creatures who don't follow a prescribed set of rules, customs or beliefs. Independent thinkers and believers."

Greg then turned in the other direction for his own guard duty when Desmond asked, "That's a good thing, ain't it, boss?"

Greg smiled radiantly when he yelled out without hesitation, "Beats being called a rogue like you don't belong anywhere."

The rogues looked at their queen, who was speaking animatedly to Octavia and another discretus who were right behind her when she jogged away, and the rogues couldn't deny the warmth she gave them just through a simple swap of one word. For once, they didn't feel like they were being ostracized from the general society. She made them feel...special, maybe even above those who blindly followed rules.

Even the non-rogues felt like they had learned something from their queen. If the law-abiding creatures were being honest with themselves, they would admit that they had tried their best to keep their distance from the rogues, who 'earned' that label after causing some form of trouble.

But now that Lucianne addressed them as 'mavericks', it somehow felt like they may be able to make an attempt at...forgiveness, and possibly acceptance of these creatures who were now helping them with the present threat.

When Lucianne looked around and realized that she was the only one standing guard with the exception of Greg who was taking his time to get to his side of the field, her confused eyes darted back to everyone who were still staring at her in awe and appreciation.

With nothing but annoyance in her eyes since she didn't know what went on after leaving the circle, her arms raised into a 'what' sign as she shouted across the field, "WHAT ARE YOU GUYS DOING STANDING THERE?! THE FIRST HOUR OF PRACTICE STARTED TWO MINUTES AGO!"

Upon hearing that, Greg's animal prompted him to ditch walking and start running to his spot. Everyone else's eyes bulged wide-open as they cursed under their breath at their queen's ferocity before frantically searching for their decipio partner and pulling their wolf or lycan partner to start practice.

Xandar, Christian and the ministers sprinted to cover the edges of the field. Toby and Juan even knocked into each other by accident when they were in the midst of rushing. It didn't matter how long they knew Lucianne, it was still very possible to be scared of her when she barks out orders like that.

Xandar was at his wife's side in an instant, and he pecked a sweet kiss on her temple to calm her agitation before muttering, "Sorry for delaying their practice, babe. And you're amazing, by the way. You have no idea how many eyes lit up when you called them 'mavericks' instead of 'rogues'."

Before he could sprint away to take his spot, Lucianne protested, "That can't be right, Xandar. That word is so ancient that it's lame to use it today. Calling them a rebel would have been cooler but I felt that there may be some...negative connotation to it that would create further friction between them and the rest of our people. I'll definitely be thinking of a better word for their group."

Xandar chuckled before he cupped her cheek and assured her, "Lucy, that word is perfect. YOU are perfect. You gave them what you've already given the rest of us – hope. There's nothing lame about it at all. It baffles me how you still can't see the effect you have on creatures. If you stuck around after saying what you did, you'd feel how the tension between our kinds eased a little with the change of one word."

Lucianne's eyes went to the rogues...sorry, mavericks, who were practicing before she whispered, "Not all of them are what we thought they were, Xandar. We have to fix this. We have to fix what history and our predecessors have done to them, and what we've been taught to keep doing to them."

Xandar held her in an embrace before pecking a sweet kiss in her hair as he promised, "We will, baby. We will."

###

Margaret was practicing with Azalea with their decipio partner, Dylan. They shut their eyes like they were taught to do the previous night. After five seconds were up, their eyes opened. Since they reminded themselves and their wolves to trust their noses over their eyes, the first session wasn't very difficult to ace since Dylan only made them both see each other as enemies, removing himself from the picture.

The real challenge came when the three of them agreed that it was time for Dylan to help them level-up. That was exactly when things got a little bit out of hand.

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0 5 minutes read

Before the five-second cue was up for round two, Margaret heard fierce and loud snarls, the type of snarls that normally hit her eardrums when her rogue pack was surrounded by other rogues who were ready to attack to either steal their supplies or kill her to assimilate her followers into their own pack.

Her survival instincts took over, and she opened her eyes to find that she was surrounded by more than ten rogue wolves, and she could see that a part of their shelter was already on fire. It was exactly like her vision.

What she didn't realize was that there was no smoke smell despite the fire, and it didn't occur to her that their pack had never and would never take shelter in an open space like Polje with no trees to hide them. These logical conclusions were not at the forefront of Margaret's mind because her mind was dominated by the sight before her

Then, she heard a scream – Stella's scream coming from the room close to the fire. Her animal pushed through and the red wolf came into full view before three of the imaginary rogues pounced her way. One of the unshifted rogues was screaming condescending remarks at her, telling her how irresponsible of a mother she was being to her child who was trapped.

Margaret's claws plunged through one of the three attacking her as her canines scratched one of its eyes. She then kicked the second one towards the third one, getting them both out of the way at once before she made a run towards the burning shelter. Another rogue pounced on her but she flipped him away with one swift movement, somehow failing to register that the rogue was too lightweight for that size.

The leader came and stood in her way, with one of his followers right behind him when Stella's screams suddenly got louder.

She tried mind-linking Azalea, and her friend kept yelling, 'Margo! I'm right in front of you! I can smell you! Whatever you're doing, stop it!'

'Stella's in danger! Get to her quick!'

'No, she's not! We're being manip—'

'SAVE MY DAUGHTER, AZALEA! THAT'S AN ORDER!'

'IT'S NOT STELLA, MARGO! USE YOUR NOSE!'

Their decipio partner, Dylan, watched Azalea trying to get to Margaret without hurting her as he began to wonder whether he'd be attacked himself anytime soon. He took a deep breath and hoped that he wasn't going to regret doing what he was about to do next.

He then used his power to make Azalea seem like the next rogue who was about to attack Margaret. The red wolf growled thunderously before it leaped off the ground, and Dylan immediately removed the manipulation effects before pushing Azalea away, retaining a slight scratch across his forearm when he narrowly avoided Margaret's sharp claws. As soon as Margaret landed, she began looking around, astonished that the sight before her took a complete turn within seconds.

Tate asked Yarrington to help guard his sp0t for a few minutes as he dashed to his confused-looking mate. He got down on one knee before the red wolf and cupped its furry face.

"Mar, you okay?"

The red wolf's racing heart steadied, and its disheveled mind calmed as the sparks from his touch channeled through its being. Reality returned, and Margaret turned to Azalea and Dylan. Azalea threw a towel over Margaret, allowing her to shift back. As soon as she did, Tate helped her up.

With nothing but guilt in her eyes, Margaret asked Dylan, "How bad is the wound?"

Dylan showed her the light scratch and said, "Not at all bad, Margaret. It was my fault. I probably should have stopped you sooner."

"I am so sorry."

Dylan waved his hand with a sincere smile and said, "It really is nothing. I wouldn't call it a wound to begin with. Perhaps we should take a short break here."

When there were nods of agreement, Azalea and Dylan went to watch different pairs, watching them struggle and trying to see if they could learn anything themselves.

Margaret muttered in Tate's way, "Gosh, that was a disaster."

Tate's hands stroked her shoulders in soothing motions when he said, "It's only the second day of practice, Mar. You'll get there."

"No, what I mean is..." she looked around before she whispered, "The vision I had...wasn't of reality. It was of my own manipulation practice. I just wasted everyone's time and messed up every creature's peace of mind by telling them that there was going to be an attack tonight. The attack already happened...in my mind."

"Hey," Tate cupped her cheek again, and looked into those guilty rosewood eyes with a soft, assuring gaze as he said, "It wasn't wrong to warn us about it. Any one of us would've done the same thing. It's no secret that psychic abilities take time to develop and perfect. Mistakes are bound to be made. It wasn't wrong to tell us what you saw. No one can deny that it's better to be safe than sorry, Mar. No one can blame you for this."

After heaving a heavy sigh, her eyes went to Lucianne, who got bored so she started weaving leaves, looking into the forest ahead of her from time to time while she waited for something to happen. Octavia and the other discretus she was with were now at a distance from her so that they were covering more of the field.

Margaret then murmured, "I have to tell her."

Tate followed her sights to his old friend, and he chuckled lightly before he said, "You really don't have to worry about telling Lucy. She isn't the type to criticize a genuine mistake."

His lightness was contagious, and it made her less anxious to the point where she managed to say, "So you're saying that I'm supposed to worry about the rest of them who may criticize me for my genuine mistake, Tate?"

“Those loyal to the king and queen would understand that mistakes happen. As for your own followers...I doubt they'll make you feel bad for this, Mar. And I don't think you give a damn about what the royal rogues think of you.”

It was amazing how, with just a few words, Tate made her feel that much better. Margaret couldn't stop the upward curl of her lips when she muttered, “That's true.”

Tate reached for her hand, and his fingers cautiously laced with hers. His wolf stood so still in his mind, wondering if that was the right move to make at the moment. When Margaret's fingers tightened around his grip, Tate let out an audible sigh of relief.

Margaret noticed this, and when they started walking, she teased, “Am I really that scary, Alpha?”

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Tate's smile grew more radiant when he said, “Considering that you have a wolf that can try to push through silver cuffs; you climbed to the very top of the rogue ladder while raising a daughter by yourself for more than a decade; and the fact that your followers just trusted you when you asked them to follow a plane full of lycans that we're taught to stay away from, I'd definitely say that you are terrifying.”

That made Margaret chuckle, and the sound made Tate's wolf coo and wag its tail in happiness.

Lucianne's ears perked up when she heard footsteps approaching her, and Octavia offered to keep watch while the queen paused her leaves-weaving as she listened to what Margaret had to say. To Margaret's surprise, the only thing that came out of Lucianne's mouth was a relieved ‘thank Goddess’.

There wasn't the slightest hint of anger, annoyance or judgment in her black-and-lilac orbs. In Margaret's rogue pack, there was almost no room for any kind of mistake, genuine or not. It was worse when misogynistic wolves still led the pack. Those late elders NEVER let her or any other female forget their mistakes. When Tate and Lucianne didn't make her feel sorry to begin with, Margaret felt like she was with...her birth family, who almost never judged her for blunders.

Lucianne told Octavia about it, and the consort glanced at Margaret before linking Pellethia the news without another word. Lucianne herself linked Xandar before she linked the others, strictly emphasizing that, 'If we had her power, we would've warned each other just as how she warned us. We're not blaming her for this.'

Toby linked back in amusement, 'Lucy, if there's anyone who's going to blame the future Luna, it's going to be the other duke and his followers.'

Zelena retorted, 'That's nonsense, Toby. Once Lucy gets that duke to forgive the matter, he'll obey like a loyal subject, and his followers will follow suit.'

Yarrington somehow saw the need to add, 'I personally think that the royal mavericks would not criticize the error because they themselves are pledging loyalty to the queen, not because the duke chooses to obey per se. Yes, they obey Greg Claw, but surely none of us can deny that most of them are growing fond of the queen.'

Lucianne had no intention to make the royal mavericks loyal to her. All she wanted was a smooth cooperation, and she actually grew fond of many of them herself. Their strength and resilience was something she admired, and their plight was something that she was determined to help alleviate.

Xandar's deep, commanding voice rang through the link, 'Yarrington's right. They already love her, they'll comply,' he then suggested, 'Since there isn't a threat, half of us here should resume practice. The other half of us stay with the discretus, just in case.'

Utterances of agreement were sent through the link before they decided who should go first. Xandar linked his mate, 'Babe, you go first. I'll take the first round.'

Lucianne was a little shy at the affectionate way Xandar spoke to her in their group-link to the point that her cheeks heated up. She could've sworn she heard Toby's not-so-subtle chuckles when he saw how his best friend still responded to the king's gentle tone.

After Lucianne briefed Octavia about the new arrangement, the queen threw away the partially-woven leaves and left her spot, which Xandar immediately

went to retrieve before returning to his spot, studying the half-done craft with interest.

The king's features softened when he watched his queen jog across the field to his hated cousin. His smile fell as his predatory eyes watched their exchange. Lucianne made sure she stood in a way that Xandar could see hers and Greg's side profiles when they spoke.

The duke's features hardened before his eyes instinctively roamed the space in search of the unreliable fortune-teller. But his search was brought to an abrupt halt when Lucianne's stern eyes and tone brought his attention back to her, and he nodded in compliance before Lucianne thanked him and left his side. Greg's eyes glazed over to link his followers.

Xandar only felt at ease when Lucianne was far enough from Greg, but when she reached a smiling Rafael, he tried to control his jealousy again so that Lucianne couldn't feel it through their bond. As he reminded himself that he and his mate were mated, marked, married and still deeply in love, he turned back to the forest in front of him.

Christian found this the appropriate time to link, 'Next time Annie brings up my jealousy, I'm going to use you as my buffer and say that you're worse, cuz. At least I'm not worried about a vampire stealing my wife.'

'How would you know? Annie's not even here. Have her come tomorrow night and we'll see if you really won't feel insecure.'

After Christian took a short look at Lucianne, imagining that it was Annie with Rafael instead, the duke cleared his throat and linked, 'I'll bring Annie when Rafael is less good-looking and more hostile.'

'You're really not helping, Christian.'

'My primary job as your favorite cousin is to annoy you. Helping you comes second.'

'You are so lucky you have no competition.'

'I know, cuz. Your love for me is eternal, as is mine for you.'

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Greg's eyes glazed over to link the royal mavericks, 'The fortune-telling was a false alarm, and the queen has emphasized the need to refrain from exerting blame on the maggot, so don't. But keep an eye on them, all of you. The queen's safety is our top priority. Investigate at the first sign of danger.'

'Yes, Your Grace,' they uttered in unison through their link like they'd done a hundred times before.

When Greg ended that link, Hailey's private link came through, and she told him about Kate. He asked, 'Anything of use tonight?'

'She seems to have some aversion towards the empress. When the queen was speaking to us and everyone's eyes were on her, this rogue kept glancing at the empress with...hate. It's just a preliminary suspicion, Your Grace. I'm still trying to see if it happens again.'

'Physical profile?'

'Brown, six-feet, bob hair, in a faded green top tonight.'

His eyes scanned the field for Hailey before finding Kate not far from her. He took a good look at Kate, memorizing her features as he linked in response, 'Get another two of our own to help you keep watch, those near where this rogue is practicing. Good work, Hailey.'

'Roger that, Your Grace.'

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