

The Rogues Who Went Rogue Chapter 91 - Tips

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Pellethia held the scroll and read aloud, “Only the creatures willing to go through any lengths to protect those who need protection most shall inherit the Forest of Oderem.”

At the end of it was a signature that vampires had only ever seen in museums – the signature of Count Dracula.

Greg’s eyes went back to the ceiling before the pessimistic part of him spoke, “I wonder how the inhabitants planted it there.”

A shade of suspicion entered Pellethia’s eyes of wonder as she turned to Greg and asked, “You really think those who hid here put this there, Your Grace?”

His eyes were still stuck on the ceiling when he replied, “I don’t know. I’m not well-versed in...forest magic.”

Christian questioned, “Wouldn’t they have to forge Dracula’s signature before even putting it up there? And have you seen the count’s signature, Greg? The strokes are illegible AND complicated.”

“Doesn’t mean it can’t be done. For all we know, that whole thing is forged.” Greg murmured as his eyes continued to scrutinize the ceiling for signs that it had been manually tampered with before a small chunk of dirt fell straight into his eyes.

He cursed aloud and Christian tried very, very hard not to laugh. Before Lucianne could follow her instinct to go help Greg, Xandar held her back by her waist and got Ivory to lead the duke to the river to wash his eyes.

When Ivory got his boss out, Xandar faced his wife and came up with the best excuse he could think of, “You’re needed here, babe. Let Ivory do it.”

Lucianne took a deep breath to stop herself from starting a petty argument with her husband, and Christian swallowed the chuckles as he said, “Well, I guess that confirms that the scroll is genuine. It’s nice to have a location that does this sort of true or false thing, especially when it does it on Greg. We should have something like this back in our territory, cuz.”

Instead of agreeing, Xandar chose to say, "I'm beginning to see why the forest fell for you, Christian. You're quite the flirt."

Xandar was elated with the growing humor in Lucianne when he said that. Christian, on the other hand, didn't find it funny anymore when he narrowed his eyes at his cousin and heard the light chuckles from his cousin-in-law.

When Greg returned, he was still murmuring profanities under his breath. He reached the discussion circle, lowered his ego and grudgingly asked, "Since that thing is...not forged, does this mean you're the heir, Your Majesty? Do you have control over this ceiling dirt?"

Pellethia was trying not to laugh for courtesy's sake, and attempted to respond as neutrally as she could, "The scroll doesn't say whether I am the heir, Your Grace, but I currently have no control over any dirt in this place."

Greg bit the inner walls of his mouth to stop a stream of sarcastic comments he had for the forest before he eventually gestured to the grill partition pushed back by a wall of rocks, and suggested, "Let's check that, shall we?"

Octavia then asked, "Should I get a few fortis fellows to break it?"

Lucianne replied, "We should have the whole partition checked to see if it's connected to any traps first, Octavia. I'm linking Toby, Tate and Phelton."

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When everyone was granted the green light to commence investigation after they entered through the metal opening, Toby, like everyone else, picked a random corridor to investigate as they left the royals to study the main area.

As Toby went down that corridor, his wolf started getting intrigued by the pleasant scents of gardenias and apples. He and six others came to the end of the corridor with ten rooms, and he didn't even pause like the rest before he entered the second room from the left.

There were dry leaves at the corner piled up to shape a bed, which seemed to be only large enough to accommodate one adult creature. This was strange to Toby because the general species scents confirmed that there was at least one vampire and one wolf who frequently occupied the room. He wondered if

vampires preferred sleeping on the dirt floor. He knew for a fact that he didn't like that less comfortable option as a wolf.

At the opposite corner stood a wooden table and chair made from poor carpentry. Strands of long, dark hair on the floor and the scent confirmed that whoever lived there was a female. It was getting more perplexing when the same strand carried both the vampire AND wolf scent. Even mates, whose scents were mixed, wouldn't be able to attain such a balance in their odor. Their own individual scent will always dominate over their mate's after marking and being marked. Why was this scent now different?

Toby then moved his attention to the table, where he found rocks of various shapes, no doubt for various uses. The long-shaped rocks with sharp tips could be a carving tool, and the oval-shaped ones could be used as paperweights.

There was only one book, and he opened it without thought. In between flipping the pages, a dried-up, slender leaf fell out. He picked it up from the floor, and noticed there was writing on it. He held it against the little light he got from the dim place, and muttered the word under his breath, "Ella."

The name made his wolf howl in excitement. His human part was so shocked that he just stood there in the middle of the room staring at the leaf in disbelief. It wasn't until Lucianne mind-linked him, Tate and Phelton did Toby blink. He left the book on the table but placed the leaf gently in the inner pocket of his jacket before meeting Lucianne and the others at the grill partition.

Lucianne immediately saw the difference in her best friend's demeanor, and asked in concern, "Are you okay, Toby?"

Toby tried to act natural, figuring this wasn't the best time to say something like 'I think I smelled my mate in the room I was looking through'. He thought as fast as he could and said, "Yeah, yeah. So uh..." he noticed the grill pushed back by rocks and said, "We have to dig through that, right?"

Lucianne wasn't convinced that he was alright and made a mental note to speak to him later before she replied, "Well, we have to see if it's safe to break the grill first."

"Let's have a look," he uttered simply and barged forward with Xandar, Christian, Phelton and Tate.

Lucianne was still looking at Toby in concern, and Greg noticed this. The duke also picked up the sudden change after the minister's return from the brief search, so he turned away for a moment to link Alissa, 'Keep an eye on the defense minister. He's hiding something.'

'As you wish, Your Grace.'

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Greg then joined the others at the partition. He felt the grill with his hand and murmured, "It feels...new."

Tate uttered, "Even where we're standing feels new compared to the ground inside. Wherever this leads to, this tunnel was a recent plan."

Lucianne went to the far left, and stepped on boulders on the side, supporting herself with the grill as she stepped higher up to look for any strings, ropes or anything that may be triggered if the grill gate was tampered with.

Her husband sprinted over with wide eyes, and held her lower back as he frantically whisper-yelled, "Lucy, you could've asked me to do that!"

"I'm fine, Xandar. I'm just climbing." She then spoke to the others all at once, "You guys don't happen to see any strings or ropes connecting to b00by traps, do you?"

Everyone's eyes checked the whole grill. Xandar's left one hand on his mate just to assure himself that she was stable before he looked around as well. Greg pondered on what he would do if he lived here. He'd kill whoever tried to track him down after his escape. It was a given that he preferred torture but the scale of this infiltration into the hideout makes torture a little too tedious for his taste.

Kill. That's what he'd do. But HOW would he have done it?

He turned around and observed the space they entered. It would have been nice to have installed some kind of motion and weight detector into the ground, programming it to detach and release those large roots protruding from the ceiling, killing whoever would be unfortunate enough to stand below them.

As for the creatures who weren't below those structures, Greg probably would've had a device installed in the walls to fire something at them, something that killed them slowly, like lethal scents of sorts.

Desmond and Ivory came up to Greg in the midst of his thinking process, and the two said nothing until their boss was satisfied with where his train of thoughts paused before he asked, "What?"

Desmond went first, "Boss, I dunno if whoever lived here dumb or we dumb."

"I don't take dumb rogues, Desmond."

Ivory went next, "It's as if that there are no security measures around this place at all, Your Grace. No detectors, no traps, no cameras. Nothing out of the ordinary. Picture a ceiling of a house with tiled floors and this is actually like any other house we've broken into in the past. Even those houses had cameras!"

When Lucianne and the others found nothing, Octavia got a fortis to break the grill and linked a few more to start moving the rocks before the royal members turned their attention to Greg's conversation with Desmond and Ivory.

Greg replied to the two followers, "I agree that it's odd but there WILL be something here. We just don't know what it is yet. If this tunnel is new, then the creatures who lived here didn't see the need to escape until very recently. If there was never a need to escape, there wouldn't have been a need to take any security measures. Whatever they've just installed, it'll be as new as the tunnel, and it'll be something that takes the least amount of time to put in place yet still create very significant damage."

Tate uttered in Lucianne's way, "Please tell me he doesn't mean a bomb."

Greg threw Tate a berating look as Lucianne said, "I doubt it, Tate. Something that can detonate wouldn't have been hidden this well. The royal mavericks would've found it even if it were. I guess what we're looking for is something that looks ordinary but really isn't. It may contain some kind of...dangerous substance."

"Like Oleander?" Christian asked in worry, making Xandar's grip on Lucianne's waist tighten.

Lucianne put part of their worry to rest when she explained, “No, it’ll probably be a substance that’s harmful to vampires. No wolf or lycan has ever stepped foot into this forest before today, so I doubt precautions are being taken against us.”

‘Smart,’ Greg thought. He was beginning to worry at the mention of Oleander as well.

Octavia looked at Pellethia and thought aloud, “Substance harmful to vampires. It’s just beta-keratin at a very high concentration and...allicin.”

Ivory asked, “Where are those found? Tablets, sprays, laced on weapons?”

Xandar muttered, “Beta-keratin makes up our claws and canines. Allicin is a precautionary chemical injected before battling in the war for the wolves and lycans to hallucinate vampires within its proximity. Some lycans carried allicin around to jab it into the vampires but speed was crucial for such a success because allicin degrades fast when it’s exposed to air, making it lose its effectiveness with prolonged exposure. So if allicin is here, then...”

The two-second silence was killing everyone, so Lucianne gently shook his left biceps and prompted, “Then what, darling?”

Xandar got lost in her eyes, and a soft smile graced his features when he reached out to stroke her fingers on his arm before he said, “Then it’s possible that some of us had already found it but we didn’t recognize it because it’s inert.”

Christian built up on that, “Inert, meaning that it needs a trigger to be activated. Heat, water, chemicals.”

Greg started eliminating possibilities from there, “It won’t be chemicals. That’d be way too complicated. The trigger would be something simple, something that any vampire would touch or use by reflex, something...”

POP!

The bulbs on all the lamps exploded and the chemicals within filled the space. Agonizing shrieks of vampires were deafening everyone in the hideout. Lucianne didn’t think twice before she carried Pellethia and dashed out, and Xandar did the same for Octavia.

As Lucianne placed the quivering empress under a tree about ten feet away from the metal opening, the queen linked everyone, 'Get the vampires out of there! Whatever it is, it might kill them!'

The wolves and lycans who were confused about what was happening sped around looking for every vigil and minister, and got them out. While everyone was worrying about the bloodsuckers, Greg yanked out one of the lamps before leaving, and got his followers to help the other wolves and lycans as soon as he saw what they were doing. After that, the duke leaned against a tree at a considerable distance away from the weakened bloodsuckers being brought out, and took the exploded bulb out of the lamp.

After throwing the exterior of the lamp to the side, his full attention was given to the bulb that lost two-thirds of the glass that was originally there. When he figured out how the ingenious invention worked, a menacing smile spread across his face as he muttered, "Clever, but not clever enough."

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Two vigils and one minister were unconscious because they stood too close to one of the lightbulbs in a room when the lightbulbs exploded, and inhaled too much of the scent. Another twenty of them were nearing that stage as well.

Pellethia and Octavia were weakened but were the least affected since they were the firsts to be brought out. Just then, the forest exuded a lemony scent, and it appeared to be soothing the stinging sensation, reducing into a prickling one before the discomfort disappeared completely.

One by one, the vampires tried to get up on their own with the wolves and lycans by their side to support them should they fall halfway. It was astounding that none of them needed that support when they couldn't even move less than two minutes before. Still, most of them sat back down because they felt that their insides were still recovering.

Even though everyone appeared fine, Lucianne still persuaded the rulers to at least agree to link the royal medical team for every vampire's system to be checked. It didn't take a lot of pestering to persuade Octavia but it took a little more to get Pellethia to agree.

Pellethia got up and wanted to approach the hideout again. Lucianne immediately stood in her way and looked sternly into her eyes when she said, "No, Pelly. We'll take it from here. We got lucky this time. Whatever else that could be in there might be instantly lethal. You stay here with the others and wait for the doctors, we'll continue the investigation and update you and everyone else."

Octavia was sitting upright and she just got hold of her wife's hand, about to tell her that it was too dangerous to continue today but Lucianne beat her to it. Upon hearing the queen's words, the consort grinned broadly and let go of Pellethia's hand as she leaned back against the tree, closed her eyes in bliss and said, "After 193 years, it's nice to have someone else stop my wife's stubbornness for a change."

Rafael, who wasn't far away with Toby, knew that he shouldn't be laughing after everything that just happened but he couldn't hold back an amused snort, and Pellethia narrowed her eyes at her best friend. Octavia looked at her wife in amusement when she took her hand again and pecked a sweet kiss on the back as she uttered, "Let them do it, Pelly. It's not worth the risk. The poison doesn't affect their species. They'll be fine."

When the lemony scent dissipated, the vampires felt a tingling sensation on their napes. Some of them thought pesky insects were biting them at first, until their hands went to the back and felt something was being drawn on their skin. The looks they were exchanging confirmed that every vampire felt it.

Octavia slowly stood and her wife moved her blonde hair to one side for the consort to see what was happening on her nape. The faintest green glow appeared in the shape of a papilio, and when the tingling sensation ended, the mark disappeared from view.

Lucianne spoke with more relief than awe, "Well, it's nice of the forest to offer protection."

Octavia glanced at Christian and responded to Lucianne comically, "I was certain that a blessing would come soon but I didn't think that it would be this soon. I must admit that it must have taken a special someone to woo the forest to protect us with its mark."

A beige flower with red polka dots promptly grew by Christian's side, and the duke restrained his animalistic urge to tear up the flower. Instead, he bent down, ignored the chuckles and giggles, gently plucked the flower from the ground and thanked the forest like he previously did before he said, "We should get back to investigating."

When Pellethia and Octavia followed behind, thinking that they'd be fine now that they were marked by the forest, a fern by a tree sprayed a foul odor in the space between the vampire rulers and the rest of the lycans and werewolves, who all stared at the leafy plant in disbelief.

Xandar muttered, "It's probably still not safe down there even with the protection mark. You and your people should stay here, Pelly, Octavia. We'll handle this." The vampire rulers had no choice but to stay behind.

Xandar, Lucianne and the rest of their people returned to the hideout entrance and just stood there staring at the now-blackout hole, wondering what triggered the bulbs to explode. Lucianne's eyes found the lamp exterior Greg tossed aside, and Greg approached her while his eyes and smile were still stuck to the bulb, completely fascinated by the invention.

The duke handed the queen the bulb, and she held it close to her face to study it. His face softened as he watched her think, and when her furrowed brows were replaced with wide-eyed realization, he had to look away to press back a smile.

Toby tapped on the thin broken glass as he got the ball rolling, "So, instead of putting the tungsten wire in the bulb like a normal lightbulb, they lined in along the internal wall of the glass. With the heat accumulated from an extended period of the bulb being lit, it cracked the glass."

Phelton then continued, "When the glass broke, the light went out and the substance inside got out."

Lucianne took a whiff and finished off, "The substance is allicin, which would have decomposed and lost its effectiveness if it was overheated by the wire. That's why the wire was lined with the intention to break the glass, to make sure that the allicin remained effective when it got out."

Tate glanced at the vampires, some of whom were carefully testing their limbs, before he turned back to the discussion group and whispered, "I know this may not be an appropriate thing to say right now but this is rather smart."

Greg said, "I agree. But, fortunately for us, they weren't smart enough."

Lucianne handed Toby the bulb, and the defense minister studied the object when his best friend asked the duke, "Who even makes these things?"

Greg pointed at her like she just asked the right question when he uttered, "Exactly. I am still not familiar with the proditors, but I do know that there is only one rogue lycan in our territory who prides himself on having every accessible poison stocked up. In my last..." he glanced at Christian before he continued, "...business enquiry, which was quite a while ago, I do recall seeing allicin in his catalogue. But he only had one bottle at that time because no one thought to trespass to vampire territory until very recently. So, our answers will start with him – Nash Beaufort."

Phelton asked, "Is one bottle even enough to make hundreds of lightbulbs, Your Grace?"

Greg narrowed his eyes at the deputy and uttered, "I doubt he was the supplier of the allicin for these bulbs, minister. The one we'll be looking for is HIS supplier."

Lucianne then asked, "So where is this Nash Beaufort?"

Greg exchanged a quick glance with Xandar before he said, "You...don't need to know, My Queen. It's better if we took this one."

Xandar got the message, and pinned Lucianne to his side as he spoke to her gently, "He's right, baby. It's safer if they did it."

She looked up at her husband and declared, "No, it isn't. Rogues aren't stupid, and I doubt they'd refrain from gossip. Many, if not most of them, would know that Greg and the mavericks are working with us now. If the mavericks ask for information, it'll take someone living under a rock to not know that it's being asked on our behalf."

Well, Xandar couldn't argue with that.

Greg took over trying to explain by walking around what she just said, "Our people are more familiar with the routes and...culture down there, My Queen. It really is better if we executed this task."

Greg couldn't believe that he was siding with his cousin, but if this is what it took to keep Lucianne out of that territory, he'd do it. The duke acknowledged that Lucianne had the Queen's Authority, but what if she didn't emit it before she got hurt? What if she used it to save someone else over herself? Or in the worst case scenario, what if there were decipio-proditors down there now which would practically render her power useless?

Lucianne scanned the top four mavericks before she looked at Greg and firmly said, "I'm not agreeing to your suggestion until you give me the location, Greg. I don't want anything to happen, but if the plan does go sideways, I want to know where to start looking."

'All the more reason to NOT let it go sideways,' he thought. He would never want Lucianne to find her way there. Seeing that she wasn't going to negotiate any more than she already had, he nodded and gave her the coordinates and the route they'd take to get there. He then informed everyone that he and Ivory would be the ones paying Nash Beaufort a visit later that day.

Lucianne bit her inner bottom lip as she tried not to show how shocked she was by the route in the kingdom leading to rogue territory. Xandar and Christian weren't as composed when they shot each other looks of disbelief, and the second-in-command whisper-yelled, "The rogue gateway had been there this whole time?!"

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Ivory put on contact lenses and used concealer to hide his scar, and Greg wore shades and a hoodie before the two took a subway to the stop at the Primordial station, which was only a thirty-minute drive from Xandar and Lucianne's residence.

After stepping on the platform and using the loo to kill time while waiting for the crowd to disperse, they entered the elevator that was designed to only go up. The moment Greg slid a plain white card into the slit between the closed doors, the built-in scanner of the doors granted access. The pale yellow lights in the lift turned pale blue, and the lift descended.

Once the doors opened, Greg removed the hoodie and adjusted his formal wear that he was wearing underneath, and Ivory rubbed off some of the concealer and proudly put on his eyepatch. The row of cabs were there, and

Greg and Ivory hopped into their regular one, gave him the location and the driver stepped on it.

They arrived at their destination within ten minutes. Disregarding the long queue outside the nightclub with colored, fluorescent lights that read 'Nash's Escape', Greg and Ivory went straight to the entrance and stood in front of two bouncers, looking at them with a straight face. Without saying a word, the large-sized men offered Greg a bow as they stepped aside to let them through.

Greg immediately spotted Nash boasting about his business at a table surrounded by six female lycans, all of whom he himself had slept with at least once before. As soon as the duke got the nightclub owner to spot him, Greg made his way in the direction of Nash's office. Nash emptied his beer mug before he excused himself and signaled his bouncer outside his office to open the door for Greg and Ivory.

As soon as the door closed, leaving the three men alone, Nash put a finger to his lips – a sign to talk about anything but business. This was what Greg was worried about. In his absence, someone had asserted dominance, or trying to at least, and they even got to independent proprietors like Nash, whom Greg left alone out of mutual respect.

Upon receiving the signal, the duke threw Nash an empathizing gaze when he spoke in a business-like manner that anyone listening wouldn't know what he was showing on his face, "I'm looking for something, Nash, something strong."

"The same as the last?"

"No. This is to end a very powerful creature. Instantly."

"This doesn't fit into your usual modus operandi, Your Grace. May an old friend ask why?"

"That depends on whether you have what I want or not."

Nash chuckled and gave a firm nod to acknowledge the duke's empathy. He then walked across the room to a small, round table where a miniature lyan in a fighting position stood. He bent the tail and the bookshelf moved to the side to reveal his storage space.

Every type of poison in existence had its own special place on the shelves that covered the four walls. Greg and Ivory immediately spotted bugs placed on the inner shelves. There were ten that they could see, but none were positioned at the table where business was normally discussed, so it was safe to conclude that these were just listening devices.

The round, glass table in the middle had only two chairs placed opposite each other. Greg sat in one, and Ivory stood behind him. Nash took a round-bottom flask with brown-colored liquid and set it on a stand on the table.

Nash sat, smiled, and began, "This is called Neplus Vivre, Your Grace. It's effective as it is quick. This..." he wrote something on the notepad before he slid it towards Greg before he continued, "...is my quote for one milliliter."

Greg read the 'quote' on the notepad, which said, 'You took too long, Your Grace.' He noticed there was a folded paper underneath the first page of the notepad, and after exchanging a look with Nash, took it out to unfold it quietly as he kept the conversation going, "The last time I was here, it was a long time ago. Has the traceability of poisons improved or deteriorated?"

It was a stupid question to buy time. He and Nash knew that poisons would always be traceable.

"Well, you got away the last time, didn't you, Your Grace?" Nash continued playing along.

"Barely. If this leads back to me, I don't want it."

"Perhaps something with a more common scent then." Nash got up and continued pretending to be looking for some other poison.

Greg sped read the note. 'I wrote this in advance waiting for your arrival, Your Grace. Six months after your imprisonment, we were all paid a visit. Klementine's assistant, Feva, turned against her and has a new employer, who is now forcing us to submit to that authority. We have been instructed that, should you ever return, we are to treat you as how we normally would, to not raise suspicion while they monitored yours and your followers' movements. I can't tell you how grateful I am that they can't plant bugs in mind-links. Emily, Jordan and I agreed that we remain at your service, Your Grace, out of mutual respect, as always. But we fear that your own safety may

be compromised. The main reason this new, anonymous employer is gaining influence is because we are told that you would give us up to the kingdom's authorities, to the queen herself, once you're given the chance.'

Greg scribbled his reply and when he put down the pen, Nash grabbed another glass bottle and returned to his seat, where the notepad already was as his quick eyes read the duke's response, 'Klementine would die before she allowed one of her goons to continue living after betraying her. This new story claiming her as the victim does not sit with logic. She has to be involved in challenging me. As for the kingdom's authorities, I give you my word that I won't let you or the others be found unless I can guarantee everyone's safety. The queen is different when it comes to accepting us. It was the only reason why I disclosed my followers to her. If we help her, she'll help us. There's a threat against her, involving vampires, which I'm sure you've heard about. I need to know where your supply of allicin comes from.'

Nash lifted the purple-liquid bottle and started promoting its benefits, "This one is special because it carries the general lycan scent. The inventors were very clever to neutralize the original odor that it would seem as if any lycan could've committed the murder."

"You're guaranteeing me that this one has no loopholes? Not even if an autopsy is performed?"

Nash replied in mock impatience, "Your Grace, an autopsy would only reveal the cause of death, and it so happens that this happens to have such common elements that'd those bird-brained police up there would take decades to track, if they're able to track it at all!"

Greg asked monotonously, "And the quote for this is?"

Nash scribbled on the purported quote on the notepad and pushed it back to the duke. Greg smiled, and then said, "I'll take this one then."

"Of course you will."

While waiting for Nash to fill up a small vial using a dropper, Greg reread the name and address, committing it to memory, before he smiled softly at the question Nash added at the end. The duke scribbled on the notepad again to answer why he was helping the authorities when he could've just stayed out of the whole thing, adding his own last question to the message.

When the vial was ready, Greg stood, handed over a stack of cash, shook Nash's hand and uttered the usual 'It's been a pleasure doing business with you.'

At the entrance of the room, Greg turned back, awaiting his answer to his last question, to which Nash chuckled lightly as he shook his head, mouthing 'no'.

Greg nodded with a smile in acknowledgment, and composed himself before he and Ivory left Nash's office.

Nash turned off the lights and let the bookshelf hide the secret room once more. He stood at the fireplace and threw the whole notepad into the flames but for one sheet, Greg's last response which intrigued Nash so much that he had to read it again – if you ever have the chance to fall in love with a creature that stands apart the way she does, Nash, you'd understand why. By the way, is this thing really untraceable?

Nash chuckled to himself when he reread the question, and couldn't help but feel sad when he reread the sentence preceding that. So it was true. The duke had fallen for the queen. Nash sighed and threw the sheet into the fire, then leaned against the fireplace. For the first time since he was a young boy, he looked at the ceiling and conveyed a silent prayer, "Goddess, spare him the torment. He may not be the best man but he is a good man."

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Greg and Ivory got back into the cab and went straight to the address Nash just gave him. They reached the factory within forty-five minutes.

When they got off and stepped towards the entrance, the two guards glowered at the duke and his follower. With an unperturbed expression, Greg announced, "I'm here to see Ruby Lyworth."

"Ms Lyworth did not mention any visits or appointments being scheduled today."

"Tell her that Greg Claw demands an immediate appointment."

Greg's name got the guards on full alert. The duke, on the other hand, was insulted. How could there still be creatures who didn't know what he looked like? The rogue world wasn't even that big...alright, in all fairness, it did

expand over the years, but shouldn't these newcomers at least know the face of the person who was in-charge here? He hadn't even been gone for a year!

Sensing their hesitation, Greg murmured in a low, homicidal tone, "You have one minute to get me an appointment, or I k!ll you both, and if you have families, pray that I'll never find them."

Upon hearing that threat and acknowledging that Greg had a good track record in hunting down creatures and torturing them, one of the guards linked Ruby while the other politely said, "Give us a moment please, Your Grace."

Greg crossed his arms and his left foot tapped on the ground while he waited impatiently. His mental count reached fifty-seven when the guard who was mind-linking swiped his access card on the monitor at the gate and invited them into the compound as they offered a slight bow and muttered, "Apologies, Your Grace."

As Greg and Ivory walked in with one of the guards, they both caught the look the two guards exchanged. There wasn't the usual unwavering submission to the highest position but a knowing look that Greg might not be the one they'd be obeying in the near future. Maybe Nash was right – he had been gone for too long.

Within the factory with machines pumping in chemicals of various colors into bottles and vials of numerous shapes and sizes along conveyor belts, heads of employees carrying shipment boxes turned to glance at the unexpected visitors.

Greg and Ivory ascended a flight of cement stairs and came to a metal door, which was left ajar. Before the guard could knock on it, the door opened and a short, plump woman with bronze-colored curls offered a slight bow and a forced smile when she greeted Greg, "Your Grace. Please, come in."

The guard saw himself off, and the two men entered, closing the door behind them and taking the two seats in front of the office desk piled with a high stack of paper on the left side and about ten figurines of mice stood, some on all fours and some on its hind limbs.

"Interesting decor," Greg mentioned in passing.

Ruby's eyes followed his sights to the figurines before she smiled and uttered, "Ah, the rodents. Well, they've proven to be quite useful in my line of work, so I'm sure you can imagine how they can have a special place in my heart."

Yeah, the part of her heart that was specially reserved for experimenting and potentially killing the animals.

"Anyway, to what do I owe the pleasure, Your Grace?"

Greg got to the point, "I understand you produce allicin?"

"I do."

"I need the list of all your purchasers of that particular product."

"That...wouldn't be possible, Your Grace. Client confidentiality is something we adhere to in this business. Being in your own line of businesses, I'm sure you can understand."

Greg smirked darkly and with his legs crossed, he declared, "I respect confidentiality when it's NOT used to piss me off, Lyworth. If they guarantee you a higher status or protection, you can be assured that those are sales talk for you to keep your mouth shut. Have they done anything to alleviate your status so far?"

Silence followed, and Greg proceeded fanning the flames, "Not even some form of part-payment?"

Ruby tried her best to control her expression when she cautiously challenged, "Using your line of reasoning to assume that such a client exists, how can I be assured that you can top their offer?"

"I've never touched you in the years you were here, have I?"

He knew of the existence of this factory but it was just labeled as 'poison production' in his system's archive. When the business started decades ago, it didn't have a large variety of poisons. Although Greg got his people to keep tabs on all rogue businesses, skimming through how each one grew or deteriorated, Greg didn't have information that was kept on paper since he

couldn't hack into those. For whatever he could hack into, he learned that time did help Ruby Lyworth scale her business.

Lyworth couldn't argue with Greg. She was the handful of lucky ones who were never touched or visited by the king of the rogue world, so she smiled and said, "Well, I can't argue with that. But I do have a question, Your Grace – how am I to be guaranteed safety seeing that your...style of work has...altered recently?"

Greg knew this was coming. Lucianne was right. It was no secret where his loyalty lay as soon as he chose to give himself up.

The duke smirked and decided to hurt this woman's confidence and pride enough to make her think twice before asking any questions about his decisions next time. "For a long-established entrepreneur, I would've expected you to at least have the due diligence to conduct basic research. Looks like I've overestimated you. Have any of my followers been caught since I decided to take a short vacation in police custody?"

"The fact that you didn't try to get out was troubling, Your Grace."

"Why would I get out of a place that had such promising individuals to learn about? I was looking for new recruits and where better to look than there?" he lied.

Silence. Ruby didn't expect that answer.

Greg caught the hint of uneasiness and embarrassment in her lilac eyes, and continued, "A certain customer of yours has somehow managed to piss me off while I was taking a break from governance and business. So, before I forcibly take what I want, your best move would be giving me what I ask for."

Ruby considered her options while Greg looked her dead in the eye. She mentally went through whatever she knew about this duke, and whatever little she was told about the people who were trying to challenge him.

Although she was promised a better status, one of power and monopolization in the poisons industry, she couldn't be sure if those were Grade A-sales talk or a contractual agreement. There was definitely nothing written on paper, and even if there was, it wasn't as if she could go to court and make her case. The case would be struck out for illegality, and she would be thrown in prison, her

business and legacy she had worked so hard to build would perish for one simple mistake.

But what if she played it safe? What if she gave Greg what he was asking for then, in order to remain in this anonymous player's good books, gave Feva a heads-up? If Feva's new employer won, Ruby could make her claim for what was promised to her. If Greg won, Ruby would be as safe and prosperous as she always had been.

When Ruby came to her decision, she smiled and took a white ring folder out of her desk drawer that she kept under lock and key. She then opened it from the back and extracted the last invoice, handing it over to the duke as she said, "I believe this is the only document you need, Your Grace."

Ivory stood and took it on Greg's behalf, and remained standing as he waited. Greg prompted Ruby, "When I say I want all the purchasers of allicin, Lyworth, I mean ALL purchasers."

"One can never be too careful, I see," she muttered with a fake smile as she took the thin stack between the red and blue dividers before handing it to Ivory.

Only then did Greg stand, Lyworth following suit. The duke gave a firm nod and said, "Thank you for your cooperation."

He headed for the door, and right before he touched the doorknob, his head turned and he delivered a warning in a low voice, "I hope we have an understanding that THIS is confidential. Should word be sent to the new player, you can be rest assured that I will find out, and when I do, our next encounter would be on less civilized terms."

"I wouldn't dream of doing such a thing, Your Grace!"

"You'd better not. Good day, Lyworth."

Once the door closed behind Greg and Ivory, Lyworth reconsidered her plan and still decided to send a message, via old-fashioned paper, to the anonymous new player.

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Lucianne's lycan was practically scratching its face when they knew that Greg and Ivory had started executing the plan. Her eyes would go to the wall clock every few seconds, despite the stack of files she deliberately placed in the middle of her office desk when she thought that would keep her mind properly occupied while she waited for the time to pass. She envied how well Reida was sleeping in the baby cot at the left corner.

Saying that Lucianne was worried would be an understatement. She started regretting not forcing Greg to take Desmond, Hailey and Alissa as back-up, though she doubted he would. Too many creatures would make him look desperate, and that vulnerable trait couldn't be shown in any business negotiations in the kingdom, let alone in the rogue world.

Xandar made her a cup of tea and took a chocolate bar out of the fridge before making his way to her office that was now next to his, separated only by a glass wall because he loved watching her work when he took short breaks from his own work. The moment he stepped in, Lucianne covered her face in guilt when she realized that her emotions were not under control. After Xandar moved the files to the side and placed the steaming cup in front of her, his strong hands found their way to her tensed shoulders as he pecked a kiss on her cheek.

"Sorry," Lucianne muttered guiltily and heaved a sigh, then started taking deep breaths to calm herself for the sake of her mate.

"Don't apologize, baby."

He lifted her off her seat and sat in her chair before placing her on his lap, guiding her head to lean against his chest as he handed her the chocolate bar. She looked at the bar in amusement and tore the wrapper from the top before biting into it. Xandar stroked her forearm, letting their skin contact and proximity ease the stress. Lucianne found comfort in his touch and scent, and his steady heartbeat felt like it was assuring her that everything was going to be okay.

After some quiet moments, Xandar pecked a kiss in her hair and said, "They'll be fine, Lucy. They've probably done things like this a million times before."

"That was before Greg was on our side."

"If anything happened to him or Ivory, his followers would have alerted us...well, alerted you by now. As long as we don't hear anything, they're fine."

She muttered, "I hope so."

After Lucianne snuggled deeper into his embrace, Xandar casually asked, "How's Toby?"

"I spoke to him. He said he's fine but his head is a little in the clouds if you ask me."

"Like he's keeping a secret?"

"Yeah. Maybe he's not ready to tell anyone yet."

"I wonder what it is."

"Whatever it is, he'd better tell me first. I'm his best friend."

Xandar chuckled at her territorial nature when it came to this particular friendship, which Toby easily matched before he said, "I'm sure you'll be the first to know, sweetheart."

###

As soon as everyone left the Forest of Oderem, Toby breezed through the goodbyes and took his jet to a place he once went to with some friends in his teenage years.

On his way there, Lucianne linked him and it felt very uncomfortable to not tell her what he felt in the hideout. He was sure she suspected something was up, and he wondered how he was going to break it to her. He got excited over a name on a leaf.

There weren't any living creatures there to confirm that he was getting excited over a bonded mate. The most unsettling thing was that his wolf was so sure that that was his mate. He never heard of a creature finding their mate through their things. The mate itself normally came first, not the objects they owned.

His jet landed in a green space because he wanted to go on a short run. He sprinted for half a mile to get the frustration and confusion off. The wind grazed his skin as the scent of leaves and grass graced his nostrils. Not long

later, Toby was welcomed by the sound of waves crashing on the shore and the squawking of a few seagulls.

He paused to catch his breath, and took off his shoes to feel the grains of sand beneath his feet. His sights went to a few boulders where he and his friends sat to take a group photo when they came here more than a decade ago as teenagers. It was a group of six guys, five of whom were now dead from fighting rogues over the years. He lost the last one two weeks before he met Lucianne.

He still missed them, and never had the strength to come back to this beach since then. Somehow, on this day, he felt that he had to come here, that he was being pulled here, though he couldn't fathom why.

At the six boulders, his hand went to the names engraved on each one. When he reached his own name, he sat on the boulder, the same place he sat when they took a group photo. He found himself tearing up and muttering, "I do have new friends now but I still miss you guys."

He watched the sun that would be setting in less than an hour's time. A part of him wanted to leave to avoid having to watch the sunset like he once did with his friends, but a larger part of him asked him to stay, not to remember what he lost but to honor the memories he shared with those he loved.

When the sunset began, he took a deep, steady breath, recalling his friends' laughter and the stupid things they'd say and do together, and he felt lighter, happier. He knew for a fact that they were in a good place, and smiled at the boulders before talking like his late friends were right there listening to him, telling them about the progress White Blood has made over the years, how the wolves were now treated better, how much he had personally grown.

He saved the best topic for last when he said, "I have a best friend for many years now. Her name's Lucy. I know the six of us swore that we'd never pick one over the other for exclusive friendships but...I'm sorry, guys. She's really cool...and really scary. It's kind of stupid to refuse being best friends with her. You guys should have met her. She'd definitely kick your a.sses in ten seconds flat, probably even break your spines if she's in the mood. She broke Tate's in their first spar by the way."

In the midst of detailing how Lucianne helped White Blood, his wolf caught a scent of gardenias and apples, making him pause in his storytelling. He got

up, and followed the trail that led him to a few palm trees not far from where he sat.

There, he saw a female in a grey sweater and black pants looking straight at him, her wide blue eyes amplifying shock and even a little fear. Toby had never been struck by anything more gorgeous, and while his wolf declared 'mate', he uttered, "Ella."

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0 6 minutes read

In the new hideout, Gerella had just explained to the kids (again) that they couldn't go out to play yet because the weather wasn't good. The truth was they were never going out to play now that they were hatching yet another escape route. After reporting to Saxum about the food supply, Gerella went for a stroll in the forest.

She was enjoying the coolness and the peace of the greenery in her invisible form. Then, she heard something. A rhythm. Lup-di-duh-di-dup. Over and over again. It was the most beautiful sound that she'd ever heard. But where was it coming from? There wasn't a soul in sight, unless this was another discretus? Was she hearing the bodily fluid of the mate their Lord had bonded her to?

Gerella was excited but also nervous. She followed the sound, and found herself walking towards the beach, the very location Saxum had told everyone to steer clear of because there was no cover. The sunset was blinding, and she was nearing the sand when she noticed someone on one of the boulders. He appeared to be talking to himself. Her eyes moved away from him until she realized that the beautiful rhythm was from this creature.

Who was he? Why was he sitting out in the open like that? Wasn't he afraid of getting caught or killed with proditors and rogues nearby? Was he a local?

Her shoes hit the sand and she started noticing his features. When she registered his tanned skin and onyx eyes, her footsteps paused and her excitement was put to an abrupt halt. He wasn't a hybrid like her. He was a pure wolf. She doubted he was a rogue. He'd be with Klementine if he were. This was her turf.

Gerella racked her brain for what to do next. Before she could decide, Toby's talking stopped and he started sniffing the air. Gerella's heart raced, and while

her invisibility powers would normally hide her when she felt scared, it revealed her this time instead even though she was terrified.

She couldn't move even when Toby was right in front of her. The way he said her name when he towered over her melted her entire being. They stared into each other's eyes for the next few moments, and Gerella couldn't believe that the Lord and Goddess would bond someone this handsome to her. She craved to trace his bushy eyebrows and Greek nose, to run her fingers through his dark hair.

Toby, on the other hand, wanted to take her hands and feel her fingers, to feel what it was like to have her bury herself in his chest. His animal, like the uncivilized animal that it was, encouraged him to go for it but Toby knew better than to scare off his mate by doing something that spontaneous.

Very carefully, he took out the leaf from his jacket and handed it to Gerella when he whispered, "I think this is yours, Ella."

She stared in disbelief at the leaf she used as a bookmark before she cleared her throat and managed to utter, "T-Thank you."

Her voice was as delicate as it was alluring. It made him forget about the present threats, troubles and problems of the kingdom for a while. At that moment, he just felt at peace.

"Um..." Gerella hesitated.

"Yeah?" Toby closed their distance and prompted in a gentle whisper.

"Wh-What do I call you?"

Oh. He got so caught up in her that he forgot that he hadn't introduced himself. His smile turned into a short, soft chuckle, and then a grin when he said, "It's Toby, Ella."

"Toby," she repeated, sending a spark that travelled throughout his bloodstream. "S-So, you...don't mind?"

"Mind what?" He took her hand, and found that it was a little colder than the average creature.

Gerella could see that he was slowly coming to realize she wasn't like him, so she answered, "That I'm a hybrid, born from the union of a wolf and a vampire."

Toby's eyes widened as his mind shut down. All that came out of his mouth was, "Oh. I definitely didn't expect you to say that."

Gerella would've been discouraged but the fact that he didn't look disappointed or upset made her hopeful. He just looked shocked and confused, and he explained why, "Not that I don't like the idea of...that but...I just didn't know hybrids existed. Like how do you operate? When do you sleep? Do you drink blood seeing that you're technically...half a vampire?"

She felt his warmth, his curiosity, his genuine effort of wanting to know her kind, and that was what touched her. She couldn't help but find his way of asking questions humorous, even charming. Life as a proditor under Saxum's command had very little laughter, if any. Gerella herself was only smiley around the kids to cheer them up but it would have been nice to have someone make her smile and laugh for a change.

Gerella chuckled lightly before she replied, "Those things are different for each hybrid. It all depends on which genes our bodies are inclined to adopt. Personally, I sleep at night. I find more beauty and life in the morning, so it's sad to just be sleeping throughout the day."

"That's good to know," he whispered affectionately as his thumb stroked the back of her hand.

Gerella felt an unfamiliar warmth creep up her cheeks. No one ever had this effect on her. Then again, she lived underground. There weren't really any opportunities to meet creatures who weren't in hiding.

She tried to stay focused despite how hard it was to do so with Toby looking at her like he just got a new pair of eyes and was seeing for the first time, and she continued, "I do drink blood but it's not my staple. I mean, I don't vomit when I drink it, but I wouldn't say that I crave it every single meal. It's just another food option for me."

Toby weighed in this fact and mumbled, "That does make sense, actually. So...when you guys hunt, do you drink its blood first or eat it first?"

Gerella pressed her lips together to rein in her laughter from his random question before she answered, "Blood first, then eat. It's less messy. And we don't hunt. The Forest of Oderem spoils us, and exudes scents to lure animals in. We're practically killing what's being brought to us."

Toby scoffed in amusement. "And here I was feeling sorry for you guys that you'd have to eat nothing but those fruits in the trees and fish in the water."

"Oh, those fish can't be caught or eaten. They're like the forest's pets and have been there for centuries. Someone tried to catch them once. He got a fever for a week."

"Huh, pets."

He wondered if his next question was going to be offensive, and Gerella made their eyes lock when she asked, "What is it?"

Toby ran through how he was going to ask his next question three times in his head before he put it out there, "Do hybrids...age?"

Gerella found it funny that Toby looked so nervous to ask about aging. "If you're asking how old I am, Toby, I'm 45. Hybrids do age, and it differs from one hybrid to the next, but for some reason, our appearance always adopts the slow-aging one of vampires. It's not an accurate indicator of how long we'll live though. Some live up to 300 years old like wolves; some up to 500 like lycans; and a handful live up to around 2,000 like our leader, Saxum."

Gerella realized she just steered their light conversation towards a serious, melancholic one. There was something about Toby that just made her feel safe to say anything that came to mind. She then recalled the leaf he gave her. Their hideout had been found by the authorities.

Toby also came back to reality at the mention of a leader. He was the kingdom's defense minister, the queen's best friend, one of the strongest and most trusted allies. Now, the Moon Goddess saw it fit to bond him to a proditor. The worst part was he didn't even mind. He would take her on a date right now if she let him. But circumstances and responsibilities had to get in the way.

"Ella," Toby began uneasily, his hands held hers so that she wouldn't run away when he said, "I think you know who I am, and I'm sure you know how

and where I found that leaf. Please, I don't want to hurt you or anyone. But I need to know about the creatures trying to challenge the Queen's Authority."

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Gerella's fairytale moment came to an end as well, and she wished she could just disappear but her ability seemed to be denying her request, so she stayed fully visible as she glanced back into the forest. "Part of those who are involved are basically my family, Toby. We're...not related by blood, but they're family nonetheless. You can't just ask me to give them up."

"Why does your family want to challenge the Queen's Authority? If you wanted a place in the kingdom, all any of you had to do was ask. I doubt Xandar and Lucy would mind."

"Xandar and Lucy?"

"The king and queen. She's the same queen whose power your family is trying to challenge," he tried not to sound too harsh but that did come out somewhat accusatory.

Gerella knew she wasn't an innocent party here, so she calmly explained, "Asking isn't an option for us. Some of those who lived long enough to try saw the repercussions of that."

"Like Saxum?"

"Yes."

"What happened when he tried?"

Gerella glanced at the forest again, making sure that no one was watching them before she explained in a whisper, "It was in Emperor Kosh's reign. Saxum's mother was a vampire, father a lycan. They had a set of twins together. It is said that the late ruler felt hybrids like us defied the laws of nature, and had to be eliminated. So, not only did they kill Saxum's twin brother, they killed the creatures who made them, sending a warning that no such union would be tolerated."

She continued, "Saxum survived because he was safely taken by his governess to nearby families. He went through a few trusted hands, one after

another they kept him safe for at least a few days, until a witch advised that Saxum be brought to the Forest of Oderem, where she was sure he'd be safe, so that's what they did. The forest had long hated rulers preceding Emperor Kosh but the moment Saxum was brought in there, it was as if the shield strengthened. Authorities used to just fall ill from intrusion to search for non-hybrid proditors who used the forest to get away. After Saxum entered, the forest would choose the lethal methods to deal with authorities. It was like Saxum's presence made the forest hate those running the empire even more than it did before."

Gerella gave Toby a moment to take this in before proceeding to say, "In the decades that followed, vampires would run into werewolves or lycans at the border between the two territories, and find out that they were bonded by fate. It's reckless to remain in the empire because of what Emperor Kosh did to Saxum's family, and it wasn't wise to live in wolf or lycan territories seeing there was still tension between the species. Sure, a wolf mate wouldn't kill the vampire counterpart but they didn't feel safe knowing that another wolf might do it."

Toby challenged, "So, now the solution is to come up with some chemical to attack a creature who never attacked any of you, who had not invoked any violence unless it was to protect those she loved?"

Gerella didn't think that there was such a ruler. She was trained to think that all rulers were the same – cold, reckless, devoid of empathy. She swallowed a lump in her throat and muttered meekly, "We just want to be safe, Toby."

Toby didn't even miss a beat when he said, "Tell that to those your family abducted, Ella. Can you tell me that they feel safe now?"

Gerella bit her bottom lip and checked the forest again as she whispered, "I didn't agree with taking the children. But everyone felt that leaving them behind leaves a loose end, and they didn't want that."

Toby was too afraid to ask but had to, "Are they dead?"

She hesitated before answering, "The first death was yesterday. The rest of them are still in an induced coma for now."

"Even the kids?" His brows furrowed to the maximum.

She nodded as she bit her lip in guilt. “We didn’t want them to see anything by accident.”

Toby pressed the bridge of his nose and sighed before he asked in a low voice, “Where are they, Ella?”

She murmured, “I don’t know. They’ve been sent to the three scientists working on...the chemical. Only Saxum knows where their lab is.”

“Ella...you’ve got to admit this has gone too far. Sure, Emperor Kosh didn’t do right by Saxum and his family but that’s no excuse to attack the present rulers of both the lycans and vampires. You have no idea how close we were to war after the Blue Crescent attack. Wait, was that you guys or was that another player?”

She bit her lip before admitting, “It was one of the creatures we were...collaborating with, but we knew about the attack.”

His eyes drilled into hers when he asked, “Knew about it, or helped plan it, Ella?”

Her dimmed eyes, pressed lips and overall uneasiness gave Toby his answer. He sighed again. A moment of silence passed between them before Gerella said, “It was meant to be a simple test.”

Toby scoffed darkly as he replayed the events from the other day. “A simple test that could have sacrificed so many of my closest friends...my best friend – our queen, leaving the king who had just found her heartbroken and alone. Do you people know they just had a daughter together? Your plan was so close to leaving a child motherless, and not by accident. And that little lightbulb trick in the forest hideout? Really? You guys had to install a genocidal weapon to kill a kind that you share half of your genes with? Those vampires would’ve been dead if we weren’t there to get them out!”

Gerella started getting confused. Lightbulb trick? Was that why Saxum got the veloxes to change the lightbulbs in every lamp during their departure? It was a weapon meant to kill whoever found their hideout?

Toby used the silence to assert, “This doesn’t feel like you guys are fighting for a chance anymore, Ella. It feels like revenge. Your family, especially Saxum, wants blood.”

Gerella argued in defense, “I didn’t know about the lightbulbs. But I can tell you that whatever we’re doing isn’t revenge. As long as hybrids are safe, we won’t hurt any more than we have to.”

“Have to? You have to control and potentially klll...my best friend or have someone klll her to feel safe. Do you hear yourself right now, Ella?” Toby didn’t feel the blossoming love anymore. What was engulfing him was disbelief and disappointment.

“That’s not the plan anymore,” she muttered, not even knowing what she was doing anymore.

Toby looked at her, and she continued spilling the beans, “The scientists found that...they don’t have time to come up with something to control her power, so that isn’t the plan anymore.”

“So what is the plan now? Controlling the king then getting him to klll her?”

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Ideally, Toby would have wanted Gerella to deny his suggestion immediately, but her silence was worrying. There was nothing to control the Queen’s Authority yet but he and the others knew for a fact that the shell worked well to shield the rogues against Xandar.

Tweaking the shell to be offensive rather than defensive might take less effort and time than having to come up with something from scratch to control Lucianne. It already worked so well in Blue Crescent. With some improvements on the shell they gave the decipio-proditors, there was no doubt that the hybrids would succeed. This was getting more messed-up by the second.

Gerella started speaking again, “The queen has garnered many enemies over the years, being one of the main players to have them kicked out of their packs...”

“BECAUSE THOSE WERE HARMING THEIR PACKS, ELLA!” Even Toby was shocked that he started yelling at his mate, his voice echoing through the forest.

Gerella panicked and looked around to make sure it was still empty, but she knew she had to head back before Saxum suspected anything. She didn't plan to tell anyone about finding Toby yet.

"Ella," his voice brought her attention back to him. "Please really think about what you, your family and whoever else you're working with are all doing here. Saxum's enemy is dead. None of the ones you're targeting now have done anything to any of you. We're not the villains here."

Gerella hated that he was right. Abduction was a very difficult thing to see being executed. She would hide in the room with the hybrid children when the abductees were brought into the hideout and through the tunnel. She didn't want to get nightmares at that sight, knowing that she had a hand in it.

When she said nothing, Toby continued, "Knowing how rogues operate, I'd say you guys are going to escape soon. I don't know how you're going to hasten them without raising suspicions but if you don't want us to find you in the next 24 hours, you'd better think of something while you wrap your conscience around this whole plan, Ella."

Ella blinked. "You're letting us...go?"

Toby scoffed depressingly, "Not really. I just know that I'm outnumbered this time." He reluctantly let go of her hand, and Gerella felt cold all of a sudden. The defense minister fought through tears as he uttered, "I'd love to get to know you and be with you, but the fact that I'd have to get involved in your...family business and protect those on your side, which essentially hurts and kills my own family and everything I stand for, is making me doubt this bond."

Gerella was battling tears as well when she hissed, "Not everyone in your family is innocent either, Toby. Only two decipios returned from the test run the other day, and you're saying that none of you have blood on your hands?!"

Toby couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Tell me, Ella. Whose land were they on and what were they doing before they were killed?"

Gerella pressed her lips together and looked away, and Toby continued to declare, "We only kill to protect. We always have. We're not innocent in that we still kill, but we don't invoke a war and then play the victim."

Gerella's eyes glazed over when Regina asked her where she was. She sounded worried and panicky, asking her to return immediately. When her eyes cleared, Toby asked, "Are you even thinking about trying to call this off, or if your safety is at risk, are you even considering coming with me?"

Her hushed reply came out almost helpless, "I can't go with you. I can't just abandon them. And we're not calling this off. We have...business partners counting on this venture to succeed. We had a deal, so we have to hold up our end of the bargain."

Toby bit the inner walls of his mouth so hard that it was starting to bleed. He was hoping she wouldn't say that. He was hoping that she would, at the very least, let him bring her to safety or at the very best, say that she would try to put a stop to this monstrous plan.

His memories of meeting Lucianne and spending years growing, laughing and fighting with her came to mind, then he recalled how she was almost killed in Blue Crescent. He had already lost so many friends to ruthless creatures, he couldn't afford to lose another one, especially not the only one he cliqued with like a perfect puzzle piece, especially not for a creature he just met, who seemed to feel comfortable using a moral compass that starkly contradicted his own.

"What's your full name?" Toby asked as steadily as he could.

"Why?" Gerella asked suspiciously.

"I'm not going to kill you or anyone today, Ella. Just tell me your full name."

"Gerella Greymont. Why?"

Toby heaved a heavy sigh, cleared his throat and recited, "I, Tobias Tristan, reject you, Gerella Greymont, as my mate."

Gerella's eyes widened before a sharp pain shot straight to hers and Toby's heart as his wolf in his head howled in anguish. Gerella used the tree to steady herself, while Toby had the boulder next to him for the same purpose.

When she didn't say anything, Toby said, "This is the part where you accept it, Ella."

With her energy drained from escaping, looking after the children and now the rejection, she could only mouth in disbelief, "What?"

Toby's phone beeped and he saw the reminder to head for decipio-practice, so he looked at his still-confused mate and murmured in guilt, "Ella, I know I'm being a d*ck by pushing you to do this quickly but you know we both need to hurry back to keep off suspicions and worry."

Gerella heard about rejections and bond snaps, but she never imagined it would be this painful, and she never thought it would happen to her when she had done nothing but follow orders and help out her whole life. She didn't deserve to feel this pain, did she?

Despite her weakened state, she muttered, "No."

Toby's brows raised in surprise. No? His wolf was already wagging its tail, as if it was celebrating getting back their mate. Even his human part couldn't deny his hopefulness. Maybe not all is lost.

"Ella...come with me," he urged desperately.

"I can't. I'm needed here. I can't turn my back on everyone I know."

"Not even if you can see their plans are more destructive than beneficial? Do YOU find that it's more beneficial than harmful?"

She didn't have an answer. She was so sure the hybrids were the victims before Toby spelled out how creatures, innocent creatures, almost died from their plans. She thought she was okay with experimenting, but now, she wasn't so sure anymore.

Toby allowed himself another two-second look at his mate, who remained tongue-tied, before he said, "Something to think about, I suppose. Take care, Ella."

He waited for two seconds before sprinting to his jet. Alissa beat Toby by two minutes after spying on them from a distance so she had time to discreetly cover her tracks with scent spray, and it was too easy to get past the not-so-alert pilot anyway.

As she hid under a seat in the back row, she linked Greg about everything she had just witnessed.

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0 5 minutes read

Greg had just come out of the elevator onto the subway platform, waiting to catch the next ride when his watchers' report came in, telling him that his suspicions were right, that they were the ones being watched all along. He asked his watchers to bring in Dormant Little Red, J.J. and Bundy, and the duke called off the watch duty immediately. The new assignment was to start looking for Klementine and her assistant, Feva.

After that, Alissa's link came through. Greg said nothing throughout the report, even when he stepped into the public transport. When Alissa was done, he ordered, 'Get to Polje for our practice with the bloodsuckers as usual. We'll fill the queen in if the defense minister continues keeping silent about this affair.'

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That night, Lucianne wasn't even subtle in sighing with relief when she saw Greg and Ivory emerge on Polje. Alissa approached the duke, and handed him a white envelope containing the pictures she took from a distance using her camera contact lenses. 'Good work, Alissa.'

When Greg spotted Toby, he got Ivory to greet the queen first as he himself went for the defense minister, who was approaching the king and queen's circle.

Greg didn't even bother checking the pictures before he slammed the envelope on Toby's chest as he said in a low voice, "You tell her, or I will."

Toby looked at the envelope, then back at the duke, recalling his skills and network before the defense minister eventually guessed what the envelope contained. He took the envelope and was not surprised that those were pictures of him and Ella. He was so ashamed of admitting to himself that he was already missing her.

Greg's stern voice brought him out of memory lane, "The last thing the queen needs is a mole in her circle, minister. My people and I swore to protect her, and we'll keep her safe even if it's from her own allies, even if it's from y—"

"If you didn't hear the conversation between us on the beach, Your Grace, don't act like you know everything. It's making you look stupid. I have watched Lucy's back long before you showed up, and I have no intention to stop

anytime soon. You're more than welcome to protect her, but don't attack me or any of us while you're at it. She may be your queen but she has been my sister-figure for almost a decade. Just as she'd k!ll to protect us, we'd k!ll to protect her. I am no exception."

"Even if it means k!lling your own mate?" Greg pressed mercilessly.

Toby scoffed sadly. "Somehow I'm questioning whether I should call her that."

Greg was going to tell Toby that that didn't answer his question, but they were stopped by Lucianne who yelled, "Toby! Greg! Everything alright?!"

Toby looked at his best friend and muttered at a volume that only Greg could hear, "No, it most certainly is not, Lucy."

He dashed to her, as did Greg, and Lucianne wrapped Toby in a bear hug like she always did. He squeezed her but Lucianne felt the unusual tightness in the embrace and some sadness from his energy. She looked between him and Greg, and declared, "Okay, things are definitely NOT okay with you, Toby. What happened?"

He took note that all the alliance members were present, as were the top mavericks from both sides and the vampire rulers, and he told everyone everything, down to the smallest detail of Gerella's eye color.

"Not like dark blue or sky blue but like pale blue, like sky blue mixed with grey."

Lucianne was holding onto her breath throughout the tale with Xandar stroking her waist with his thumb before she was eventually the first to speak when she said, "She sounds really pretty."

Toby appreciated that Lucianne didn't just completely flush away his attempt to keep things lighter than it actually was, and said, "I guess hybrids have the best genes from both species."

Christian found himself saying something going through everyone's minds, "Why you though?"

“Christian!” Lucianne hissed, knowing fully well where the duke was going with this.

Tate spoke next, choosing his words carefully, “It just looks like a mistake now, Toby. It might not be one.”

Toby looked at Margaret, then back to his Alpha before he said, “I’m not sure if I’ll get that lucky, Alpha. My mate, her family and the creatures cooperating with them are basically the ones we’re hunting down.”

Greg was, by far, the least empathetic one when he said, “Funny you didn’t link for back-up when you realized who she was.”

Lucianne’s eyes widened in ferocity when she addressed Greg, “That’s enough, Greg. Retreating was the only way to guarantee his own safety. She might not have killed him, but I don’t think we can say the same for her family.”

Seeing that he angered her, Greg’s head tilted downwards by a few inches as he murmured, “Of course, My Queen.”

Lucianne sighed in frustration before she declared, “Let’s just focus on finding solutions now. Ella gave us...a lot to go on...assuming that whatever she said was true.”

Juan cautiously asked Toby, “Did she look like she was lying?”

Toby bit the inner walls of his mouth when he replayed their exchange before he said, “Not to me. But it’s hard to say. I’ve only met her once, and I don’t know if hybrids feel the mate-bond as strongly as we do to actually feel uncomfortable lying...and I already began questioning her conscience anyway, so...I don’t know.”

With a hand on his shoulder, Lucianne assured him gently, “We’ll figure it out together, Toby.” He forced a smile, and was immensely grateful that she was giving him the support he so desperately needed at the moment.

Lucianne then did a recap of facts, “So, her family are hybrids, who hid in the Forest of Oderem because the late Emperor Kosh killed their leaders’ family. They don’t trust wolves or lycans either because of the conflict with the vampires. They’re working with three scientists...whose names we don’t have

yet. The abductees are in their lab...which only the leader knows where. And the current plan is to...manipulate Xandar to...gain control.”

No one dared say the ultimate plan was to make Xandar kill Lucianne, even though everyone knew it. Xandar’s lycan had been growling in anger, and its human’s breathing got heavy as Lucianne’s thumb stroked the back of his hand, letting the sparks calm him as her animal cooed to his through their link.

Pellethia tried desperately to meet Lucianne’s gaze, and when their eyes locked, Lucianne knew exactly what she wanted to ask, so she gave a firm nod. The empress glanced at Toby before she linked all 26 vigils to give them the hybrids’ location, and instructed, ‘Take the available custodes with you and arrest every one you find. Kill only for self-defense.’

‘Yes, Your Majesty.’

When she ended her link and registered that it was still silent, she decided to get the ball rolling again, “What this woman said about my late father killing a hybrid isn’t true. He killed a vampire who married and marked a lycan because the lycan was part of the conspiracy to end Rosalie’s life and put Reagan in solitary confinement. The reason was never that they defied the laws of nature or anything like that. He was avenging an ally.”

Tate asked, “Then why kill one of the children?”

Pellethia replied, “That’s where it gets even more erroneous. There were no children. That was why father had no remorse for doing what he did.”

A long moment of silence passed before Toby whispered to Lucianne, “I’ll believe whatever you believe, Lucy. I don’t know what’s real anymore.”

Lucianne was not doing any better, being equally confused. “Pelly, how was Emperor Kosh...sure that there weren’t any children? How did he get the information?”

“Like any ruler before him, he sent the vigils to investigate,” something came to her mind, and she added in a low murmur, “Maddock was in-charge.”

Lucianne looked at Toby and said, “That’s our next point of investigation for the child issue then.”