

Wolf Heart — by Amy T

Chapter 1

During the night, the upper part of Athea, the capital of the Kingdom of Nodor, remained mostly quiet with the exception of the militia patrolling the streets. Down at the port, built between the Eyor River—that split the city in two—and the great Ucias Lake—from which the river was born—things were quite different. Most street lamps were broken, and the militia was seldom present, making it an ideal location for disreputable establishments such as taverns and brothels. It was in front of one of the taverns that a carriage pulled up. A young woman shrouded in a dark blue cloak with the hood drawn over her face, stepped out.

After paying the coachman, the young woman made her way down the street. Drunk sailors and even prostitutes tried to grab her attention, but she held her head down, paying attention only to where she was stepping. Puddles of mud, and those of doubtful origins, covered the dirty streets. Minutes later, she stopped in front of a tavern built at the end of a narrow and dark street behind some warehouses.

Before entering, she looked over her shoulder. Except for a few drunken men, the street behind her was empty.

Sailors and local thugs occupied most of the tables. The smell of tobacco was thick in the air, the young woman covered her nose with part of her hood as she made her way inside the busy tavern.

At the very end was a small table, a man wearing a black cloak sat at it, drinking from a pint of beer. His face was in the shadows. The young woman stopped next to the table, and after she assured herself no one in the tavern was looking at her, she sat on a chair next to the man.

The man leaned over as if to see the woman better. He drank from his beer while studying her, his blue eyes shining with intelligence. He appeared to be around nineteen years old. His short black hair was disheveled, and the shirt beneath his cloak was partially unbuttoned—as if he had been in a hurry to leave when he left home. With high cheekbones and a chiseled jaw, he could be easily mistaken for an aristocrat if not for the piercing on the bridge of his nose.

In the Kingdom of Nodor, those born out of wedlock were considered illegitimate. Sons and daughters of mistresses, prostitutes, or drunken sailors and travelers—the bastards were hated in the entire kingdom, for they were a sore spot. They were a reminder that women were not as pure as many men wanted.

The young woman put her hands on the table, the man slid his right palm across the hardwood and brushed his fingers against hers. A smile tugged at his lips as he whispered her name, “Rosalyn.”

Despite him not being recognized by his father at birth and not having a family name, he was finally in a good place in his life. It hadn't been easy, and he had to work hard—especially after the death of his mother. He had accomplished something that many bastards only dreamed of—becoming an apprentice to one of the most respectable Masters in the city.

Rosalyn looked around the tavern nervously. Content that no one was paying them any attention, she returned her attention back to the man in front of her. “What did I tell you about using my name while in public?” she hissed, anger flashing in her brown eyes. “What if someone heard you?”

The man did not look at the crowd that was busy eating, drinking and chatting. He would have known if someone was spying on him. “No one was listening to us. Besides, I love your name. It is as beautiful as you.”

She narrowed her eyes. “How do you know no one was listening? Do you know what I am risking coming here tonight?”

He knew the risks she took by meeting him at the tavern. Bastards were, after all, the pariahs of their society. Those like him had no hope of ever marrying and having a family. Those like him usually sired more bastards—children with no hope or future. Not something he wanted for his offspring. He had made himself a promise long ago that he would not let his family—if he was ever to have one—endure all the hardship he had suffered since the day he was born.

He took her hand in his and took it to his mouth. “Forgive my small mistake, my Lyn. It won't happen again,” he apologized before placing a kiss on top of her hand.

Her features softened, and the corners of her mouth twitched. “Small mistake?” she huffed.

Gods, how he loved her. “You know I would never put your reputation at risk.”

Rosalyn sighed. “Why did you summon me here, Jayden?”

Jayden.

That was his only name, for the man who had sired him vanished long before he was born. The family that was supposed to be Jayden's birthright disappeared into the night, along with his father.

“We need to talk, Lyn. I rented a room, but I can order something if you are thirsty or hungry.”

Rosalyn shook her head. “I just had dinner with my *cousin*,” she let him know, rolling her eyes.

Jayden knew all about Rosalyn's cousin, Minerva. He had seen her down at the port but had never approached her, not wanting to put Rosalyn at risk. Being born in the upper part of the city came with many privileges but with just as many rules, especially for women. While he couldn't care less about what Minerva was doing down at the port, between drunk men and bastards, he cared about Rosalyn's reputation. If the Gods would finally take pity on him, in a few years, he would not only have a family name but would also marry the love of his life.

"If you want to talk, then do so, for I can't stay too long. The only reason I could come tonight is that my father and brother are at the Royal Palace, talking with King Baswein. Hugo is to depart for war in a few days. My father is not very pleased, and he is hoping King Baswein will change Hugo's mind. But my brother is very stubborn."

Jayden finished his beer. "Then let's waste no more time and retire to the room."

They stood up, and after putting a few copper coins on the table, Jayden guided Rosalyn up the stairs. At the top of the staircase was a door that led to a small room. Jayden opened the door and Rosalyn entered.

A small chandelier hung from the ceiling, casting a buttery light around the room. After a quick inspection of the room, Rosalyn headed over to the bed. She brushed away some invisible specks of dust with her left hand, then took off her cloak and sat.

Jayden chuckled.

Being high born, Rosalyn was used to luxuries. And clean houses. While he barely made enough to live from one month to another, he was determined to work hard so that one day, he could give her the life she was used to.

"What did you want to talk about?" Rosalyn asked. She knew Jayden would not summon her during the week if it wasn't something really important.

After locking the door and removing his cloak, Jayden sat next to her. He cupped her cheek and kissed her tenderly. "My Rosalyn. I am afraid I have to give you unpleasant news."

Her heart started beating like crazy in her chest. "Did something happen with your apprenticeship? Did your Master throw you out?"

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Her heart started beating like crazy in her chest. “Did something happen with your apprenticeship? Did your Master throw you out?”

Despite being born and raised in a brothel and never going to school, with the help of his mother, he learned how to read and write. He had spent many hours practicing each rune of the alphabet until it was almost perfect. Even Rosalyn said he had beautiful handwriting. Despite working in a brothel as a caretaker, his mother had some connections in the city. So before her death, she had secured him a job as a scribe. He started his apprenticeship sometime later—after he took care of the remains of his mother—and for the last four years, the Scribe Mihel had been his Master.

Jayden gave her a sad smile. “No.” He took her hand into his and gazed into her soft, brown eyes. “You know that my Master is one of the most important scribes in Athea. And now, with the war between our kingdom and the Kingdom of Litus, King Baswein asked Master Mihel to send scribes to the front line. Even apprentices. I am also to go.”

Rosalyn’s eyes filled with tears. She did not expect that. “For how long?” her voice sounded like it was cracking.

His chest hurt. He hated seeing the woman he loved cry, especially since he was the cause of her distress.

“For as long as I am needed,” Jayden let her know the truth. He brushed his knuckles against her left cheek. His throat bobbed as he swallowed hard. “Wait for me,” he begged of her.

“Always,” Rosalyn promised him.

A grimace appeared on his face. He was scared of leaving her. Scared that she would find another man, one that could give her everything he couldn’t—a family name and a big house. “Do you swear it?”

After a moment of hesitation, Rosalyn said, “I swear it upon our love.”

He let out the breath he was holding in. Now, he could go to war, knowing that the woman he had chosen for himself would faithfully await his return. “You have no idea how much I love you.”

He pulled her into a hug and buried his face in the hollow of her neck, inhaling her sweet scent. She always smelled like lavender and jasmine, and he could never get enough of her sweet scent. A few strands of her blonde hair tickled his clean-shaven face, and he brushed them to her back, his mouth moving along her neck.

Her breath hitched. “When are you leaving?”

Jayden lifted his head. “Tomorrow morning. Another apprentice was supposed to go, but he fell sick last night, and the Fire Mages are still trying to heal him. I am to go in his place.”

Rosalyn’s lower lip trembled. “So soon? I wish we had more time before you leave.”

“Me too,” Jayden said before his lips found hers.

She put her palms on top of his shoulders and kissed him back.

He broke the kiss for a moment. “Can you stay a little longer? I don’t know when we will see each other again, and I want to be with you tonight.”

“Just a little longer,” Rosalyn let him know. “My new maid, Juicea, is making sure Mina doesn’t suddenly barge into my room, as I told her I have a headache. You know how my cousin is, constantly checking what I do or to whom I speak. I wish my father would send her away to an orphanage or to another city.”

Jayden knew all about Minerva. "Mina" was how she was called by her family and friends. Mina sounded...odd to him. He preferred to think of her as Minerva. Not that he especially spent time thinking of Minerva since Rosalyn was always in his thoughts.

While Rosalyn was sweet, gentle, beautiful, and generous, Minerva was cold-hearted, arrogant, and even cruel. At least from what Rosalyn told him, as he had never interacted with Minerva. Well, they had one brief encounter, but he was sure Minerva did not remember him. Nor did he want her to.

When he would return from war, he would purchase a house in his name and find a way to have a family name to give to Rosalyn so that he could ask her father for her hand in marriage. He might be one of the many bastards living in Athea, but he wanted to make things right with Rosalyn. Even if it cost him his pride.

A small wooden box was in his pocket. He had been carrying it with him for quite a while, but he felt like he couldn't wait any longer. He needed to know the answer to a question that had been on his mind for many months now.

Taking the box out of his pocket and opening it, revealing a cheap chain silver bracelet, he said, "I know you deserve so much more, but when I return, I will talk to your father and ask for his blessing to marry you. If you *want* me."

In the Nodor Kingdom, as in many other kingdoms and continents all over Aylarra, when a man gave a woman a bracelet, and she accepted, it meant she promised him that one day she would marry him.

Jayden felt like his heart had stopped beating as he waited for her to make up her mind. She had already sworn to wait for him, but it didn't mean she was willing to marry him.

Rosalyn stared at the bracelet. She looked disappointed. He felt like a failure. She deserved so much more than a cheap silver bracelet.

He was about to close the box when Rosalyn said, "Of course, I want to marry you!"

Relief washed over him. She had accepted his proposal. "This is just temporary until I can buy you the bracelet you deserve," he promised as he put the bracelet around her left wrist.

Rosalyn lifted her left hand in the air and moved her wrist left and right. "My dream bracelet is made of *solid* gold and has diamonds all over."

His heart sank. What Rosalyn was asking cost...a small fortune.

"I will do my best to make all your dreams come true."

She smiled before starting to unbutton his shirt, helping him undress.

A few hours later, they left the tavern.

The port was still busy with activity as more drunk men were out on the dark streets. Jayden led Rosalyn to one of the safer parts of the city and helped her find a carriage that would take her home.

Before Rosalyn could enter the carriage, Jayden pulled her in for one last kiss. "I will miss you terribly, Lyn. I will write as often as I can," he said against her lips.

"I will also miss you. Return to me quickly."

"I will try."

After a goodbye kiss, Rosalyn got inside the carriage, and the coachman instructed the horse to start moving.

Jayden stood on the sidewalk, his hands in his pockets, looking at the carriage disappearing down the street. Moments later, he started walking.

He was on his way to the small room he rented above the flower shop in the market when someone bumped into him—a young man, a few years shy of being of age, from what Jayden could tell.

His face was covered by the dark brown cloak's hood. He appeared to be nervous. "I am sorry. I didn't see you," he apologized before rushing in the port's direction.

Except it wasn't a young man, but a woman.

Minerva.

Why was she going to the port in the middle of the night?