

Wolf Heart

Chapter 2

A year later

Everyone living in the Uzlaya Continent knew of the hate between King Baswein of the Kingdom of Nodor and King Stig of the Litus Kingdom, as they never saw eye to eye when it came to matters regarding the safety of the continent against pirates and other invaders. When the war between the two kingdoms started almost two years prior, it came as no surprise as tension was always felt at the border between the two kingdoms, and many quarrels broke out between the garrisons.

Determined to win the war, King Baswein used most of the money from the treasury; festivals were not celebrated anymore, as people were worried the Necromancer who battled at the front lines of the Litus Army would make his way to the heart of the Nodor Kingdom, along with his undead troops, he was dangerously close to reaching the border. Among all the bad rumors, one piece of good news stood out: that a new recruit to the Nodorian army had recently been promoted to the rank of Commander, who had put a stop to the Necromancer's undead army's continual advances. It was said that he and his men were the only ones fearless enough to face the Necromancer.

There was even more good news, one that the Kingdom of Nodor had been expecting for many years—Prince Liam, the only child of King Baswein and heir to the throne, had finally chosen a bride. For months, Athea prepared for the nuptial ceremony—as those on the Uzlaya Continent referred to marriage and wedding day—between Prince Liam and Duchess Castex.

And so it happened that on the day of the nuptial ceremony, Minerva, or Mina as everyone called her, found herself sitting on a bench inside the great Fire Church of Athea.

While everyone was celebrating, she was grieving. How could she not? She had been in love with Prince Liam since they were children and dreamed of the day *she* would become his bride almost daily. Yet Prince Liam chose her cousin, Rosalyn, instead of her—his childhood friend and confidant, to be his wife. It hurt. It was more than that. She felt betrayed. She did not understand why, as he had always been fair with her and told her he only saw her as a sister. She had never confessed her feelings to him, letting him believe she, too, saw him as a brother. She came very close once but made it look like she was jesting when he started laughing in her face.

Prince Liam and Rosalyn stood before the altar, the Arch Mage officiating the ceremony. Mina recited the words of the ceremony in her head as she had learned them by heart, always thinking of the day she would be the happiest woman in the

world. That day would never come, as her heart shattered the moment Prince Liam gave Rosalyn a golden bracelet encrusted in diamonds.

“We have gathered today to share the joy of Prince Liam LaRue and Duchess Rosalyn Castex as they come before Inoss to ask for his blessing,” and so the nuptial ceremony began.

Her gaze was fixed on her hands sitting on her lap, knowing all too well she couldn't stop her tears if she looked at the happy couple because Prince Liam was indeed happy to wed the woman his heart desired.

Despite her heartache, she wanted to be happy for Prince Liam, yet...all she could feel was profound sorrow, as she had loved him for as long as she could remember.

Her father, Duke Adinet Castex, had been a good friend of King Baswein, and Mina spent a great part of her childhood visiting the Royal Palace. There, she met Prince Liam and eventually fell in love with him.

When her father and mother died in an accident, Prince Liam had been the one to comfort her and wipe the tears from her face. She had prayed that King Baswein would allow her to live at the Royal Palace, but Duke Tedric, her father's brother, claimed her guardianship, so she had no choice but to go live with him.

While her parents were alive, her uncle, who had always been a cold man, treated her well. The day she set foot in his house, the abuse began. It wasn't physical. Well, not always, as Rosalyn hit her when no one was watching, but her uncle had a way with words that always made her feel ashamed of being alive. If not for the fortune she inherited from her parents, Mina was sure her uncle would not have accepted her into his home. There had been many nights when she asked herself why her father made Duke Tedric her guardian. And better yet, why did women need guardians? She was capable of taking control of her wealth, yet Duke Tedric had that role, and on the day she would marry, her money would be passed to her husband, along with a considerable dowry, as was expected from a noblewoman like herself.

Like her father, Duke Tedric was also a friend of King Baswein and would often go to the Royal Palace, and no matter how much Mina begged and pleaded, he never took her. Hugo, Duke Tedric's only son, would accompany him as Rosalyn studied in one of the most prestigious schools for young ladies in the Kingdom of Sitia—the land of the noble High Elves. Rosalyn was home only during the summer and mostly complained about the heat or dedicated her time to making Mina's life impossible. When Rosalyn turned sixteen and no longer attended school, she began hosting tea parties with her friends almost daily, forcing Mina to serve them.

Mina sent several parchments to King Baswein, pleading with him to allow her to stay at the Palace in exchange for working there. The only reply she received was to obey her father's wishes. When her messages to Prince Liam barely received any answers, she

knew she had to endure the cruel treatment her uncle and Rosalyn subjected her to. And so she did, hoping that one day someone would save her from her fate.

Mina was already of age, old enough to receive a nuptial proposal. Despite the ongoing war, the wealthiest families in Athea still had organized balls—balls which Rosalyn attended. Like any young lady, Mina had hoped she would receive an invitation, but none ever came for her. And when Prince Liam invited all eligible young ladies in the city to a grand ball at the Royal Palace, excluding her, she felt lonelier than ever. For weeks, Rosalyn spoke only of the upcoming event and tried on dress after dress while mocking Mina for always being left behind because ‘who would want someone like you in their presence to spoil all the fun, anyway?’

It was at that ball that Prince Liam was reunited with Rosalyn and fell in love with her, destroying every hope Mina had of ever finding happiness. Prince Liam had spoken to Rosalyn once when they were children before she was sent to The Kingdom of Sitia.

After the ball, everyone only spoke of how Prince Liam, from the moment he saw the beautiful Duchess Castex—for Rosalyn, with her fair skin, doe brown eyes, and long, silky blonde hair, was considered one of the most beautiful women in the kingdom—he was smitten with her, dancing and talking only with her all night long. Seven days later, Prince Liam asked for Rosalyn’s hand in marriage.

The betrothal between Prince Liam and Rosalyn lasted six months, during which preparations were made. When her dowry and gowns—sewed by master tailors—were ready, invitations to attend the nuptial ceremony were sent out. And this time, Mina did receive one.

To add salt to the wound, soon after receiving the bracelet from Prince Liam, Rosalyn read Mina’s journal—the one into which she poured all her heart—and learned her darkest secret. In exchange for her silence, Rosalyn had Mina attend to all her needs, and Mina endured everything in silence, as she always did. Every chance Rosalyn got, she would remind Mina that Prince Liam didn’t love her because not only was her mother from the Yeton Kingdom—the land of the nomad gypsies and their one hundred traveling caravans—making Mina a half-gypsy but because of her upbringing as well. Only those with fair hair and skin were considered beautiful, and Mina who had inherited her mother’s black hair and dark skin, was unappealing for the Nodorians. She also had her father’s green eyes, like those of the mermaids who were feared, for their songs lured men into the depths of the dark waters, never to be seen again, making many fear she would bewitch them.

If only her skin were as fair as Rosalyn’s, Prince Liam would have fallen in love with her. She hated—*hated*—her skin, hair, and eyes. She hated herself.

The Arch Mage reached the last part of the ceremony. Somehow, Mina mustered the courage to lift up her head and look at the altar, which she deeply regretted a moment later. Prince Liam, who looked more handsome than ever, radiated with happiness, his

eyes locked with those of Rosalyn. The light filtering through the windows made his blonde hair appear golden, and for a moment, he looked like an Angel, making Mina forget to breathe. Her heart wept as she came to realize she could never find happiness.

Why was she cursed like that by the Gods? And how much longer would she have to endure living with her uncle? If only she were not half-gypsy, maybe someone would love her then. If she was in a room full of men, they would turn their heads away, repulsed by her skin. Even in the Fire Church, the church of Inoss, the creator of the world, she could not escape their judgment, as no one wanted to sit beside her, making her feel even worse, never letting her forget her origins.

Despite Nodorians disliking those who were 'different' or not meeting their ideals, Mina's father fell in love with a young gypsy woman who would later become his wife. When he bought her a bracelet and asked her to be his wife, he did not care about his social status or her dark skin. All he cared about was his heart telling him she was the one.

Mina had always loved her parents' love story. In time, it became her only beacon of hope, and the only reason she still dreamed that one day...her fate would change. If the Gods were good.

If only Mina were born a man, it would have been so much easier. Then her uncle would not have resented her so much for being the daughter of a poor gypsy wench—as her uncle liked to refer to her mother—who traveled from village to village and from town to town, moving from one kingdom to another, inciting men with her indecent dances. It is how Adinet Castex, the oldest son of the Castex family, met Emlya of the Desert as she danced in the night in front of a crowd.

At least that's what her uncle claimed, and Mina didn't know what to think about it as her parents never mentioned this to her. And if it were true, she didn't see anything wrong with it. Just two people meant to be, finally finding each other.

The Arch Mage kept talking, but she barely heard what he was saying.

Tears swirled in her eyes, threatening to spill down her cheeks.

Someone grabbed her left hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"You look as if you are attending a funeral instead of a nuptial ceremony," her cousin Hugo whispered. "Smiling won't kill you, you know."

Despite the pain she was feeling, Hugo's words made her heart feel light. Hugo was the only person in her life who truly saw her and loved her. And more importantly, Hugo did not agree with how his father and sister treated Mina.

It had been three weeks since Hugo returned from the war, an injury in his right shoulder produced by a dark spell left him bedridden and unable to fight. The Fire Mages were still trying to heal him, but the Necromancer's magic was strong, as his father was a Dark Elf.

"I don't particularly feel like smiling today," Mina let Hugo know.

Hugo knew how she felt about Prince Liam.

"You are young, Mina. Barely of age. You will meet many young men, and I am sure many will approach my father with a marriage request. One day, someone will love you as you deserve," Hugo tried to encourage her.

Even if that were the case—which she highly doubted—her heart would always yearn for the one she loved. "The only reason someone would want me as a wife is because of my fortune."

"And that's why they will need my approval first if they want to put a bracelet around the hand of a Castex Duchess," Hugo huffed softly.

Mina hated her family name. Not only had her father been one of the most influential individuals in Athea, but one of the richest, too. Because of that, there was constant pressure on how she dressed, talked, or acted in public. Her only reply to those who spoke ill of her was a gracious smile. As the only child of her parents, it was her duty to be on her best behavior at all times.

"Prince Liam LaRue, do you take Duchess Rosalyn Castex as your wife and always promise to protect and love her?" the Arch Mage asked.

Prince Liam did not hesitate, not even for a moment, to say, "I promise to do so!"

"Duchess Rosalyn Castex, do you accept Prince Liam LaRue as your husband and promise always to obey and love him? To stand beside him and support him when he will become the ruler of this great kingdom?"

Rosalyn gazed at Prince Liam. "I do!"

When Inoss blessed their union, the Arch Mage said, "You are one now, your union lasting until the end of time. You may kiss the bride."

Prince Liam stroked Rosalyn's cheek.

Mina closed her eyes as Prince Liam and Rosalyn shared their first kiss as husband and wife.

The Fire Church erupted in ovation for the young couple.

A celebratory feast was to be held at the Royal Palace, and Mina did try to excuse herself, claiming she was unwell, but her uncle telling her, "Don't embarrass us," let her know her ordeal was not over.

After the feast, when the couple was retiring to the nuptial chamber, Rosalyn took advantage of Mina being alone and approached her.

A cruel smile appeared on Rosalyn's perfect face. Mina braced herself for whatever Rosalyn was about to say. Over the years, she got used to hearing vicious words, yet what came out of Rosalyn's mouth next was like a hot iron rod through her heart.

"While I lay with my husband tonight, remember that you will be sleeping alone. And I don't think that will change soon because who would want to marry someone like you?"

Mina gripped the skirts of her dress, her knuckles turning white, and bit her tongue. It was not the time to reply in anger. "I wish you all the best," Mina said from the heart. "I hope you make Prince Liam happy. And he, you."

Only men were allowed to remain and see proof of the consummation, so Mina left.