

Wolf Heart

Chapter 3

The warm Spring sun bathed Athea in its bright light. The blooming trees brought hope into the hearts of Nodorians for the first time in a year, which had been especially dry. The Winter had been long and cold. A drought had affected the Nodor Kingdom for three years, as such, many of the lakes and rivers had dried out. Almost nothing grew as a result, and many people perished from hunger. However, the Spring brought rain, and finally, gardens and fields were giving fruit. The boats that once went out on the Endless Sea to find fish and came back empty-handed were finally returning with the fresh fish.

Mina put another spring onion in her basket before returning to the kitchen and helping Anette, the family maid, finish making the breakfast. She didn't particularly like gardening, but the plot of land behind the Castex mansion used for planting all sorts of vegetables had been blessed by the Gods. Else, Mina could not explain how, despite the drought of the last three years, the garden had always been bountiful when the rest of Nodor had been dry. Even the trees bore fruit all year long, having the neighbors wonder what kind of magic Tedric Castex had cast upon his home. But, Duke Tedric nor anyone from his family had mana, and without mana, magic could not be used. More than that, the Duke had always denied any allegation of spells being cast on his land.

The two pies Mina put in the oven before going into the garden were done baking. She cut a few slices from each one, put them on a serving platter together with food she and Anette cooked that morning and took them to the Drawing Room. Hugo was already there, sitting on the sofa while drinking mead and staring out the window.

Mina put the platter on the coffee table and sat next to Hugo, gently taking the goblet away from him and putting it out of his reach. It pained her to see him suffering. "How much have you been drinking since you woke up?"

He shrugged. "I couldn't sleep." Since returning from the war, nightmares have been a nightly occurrence. Mina had asked for the help of the Fire Mages, but not even their magic could help Hugo forget what had happened to him during the war. "Each time I close my eyes, I am back on that battlefield, watching how the Necromancer slaughtered everyone while I couldn't do anything to save them. And then... And then..."

Hugo could not continue talking, nor did he need to, as he had told Mina what happened the day the Necromancer attacked him and his men. Out of thirty men, Hugo had been the only one to survive, and he didn't remember how. After the Necromancer killed all of Hugo's men and raised them from the dead, he had them attack Hugo. The only thing Hugo remembered was his sword severing the head of the man who had been his right

hand and then an intense pain in his body before the world faded away. When he came to his senses, he was in the Wolf Army, alive, and his wounds were already healed.

After almost five years of war, the Necromancer had defeated almost the entire Nodorian army. In the middle of the winter, Litia was preparing to conquer Nodor when the young commander of the Wolf Army and what was left of his men launched a surprise attack and halted the Necromancer from advancing. The beginning of Spring brought not only rain and the end of the drought but the end of the war. It had all come to an end when the Necromancer was defeated and sealed in his tower, in a forest, deep inside the Kingdom of Litia. King Stig fled to his castle up in the mountains and vowed not to attack Nodor again if his life was spared. Oddly enough, King Baswein accepted.

It had been almost a month since the war ended, and those still alive were slowly returning to their homes. Hugo arrived in Athea three weeks ago, and since, he has been drowning himself in alcohol.

Mina had Hugo rest his head on her lap. "I know," she whispered.

The spells and potions purchased from the Fire Mages did not work on Hugo, but one thing always calmed and helped him sleep—Mina singing to him.

When Mina was little, her mother used to sing her a lullaby, and it was the same lullaby that she sang to Hugo now as she combed his hair with her fingers.

Hugo was half asleep when someone knocked on the front door. It took Mina by surprise as visits were usually done in the afternoon.

Hugo straightened his back and let out a sigh of annoyance. "Who could it be at this time?" Mina wondered the same. Another knock followed. Hugo's eyes narrowed. "Are you expecting someone?"

"I don't know," Mina replied sincerely.

She rarely received visits. Her only friend, Ivy, was not currently in Athea, as she was visiting some relatives in Ora Dorei, the second biggest province in Nodor.

Hugo kept talking. "A man who you perhaps met while I was...not here."

Despite her never going to a ball—which was where men got to know single ladies—Hugo still hoped that she would, one day, receive a nuptial proposal.

"Of course not," Mina huffed. In all her twenty-one years of existence, never had a man been interested in her. "Who would want me?"

“Look at me, Mina.” When she kept looking at the carpet on the floor, Hugo put a finger under her chin and tilted her head up. “You don’t understand how beautiful you are. The moment a man really sees you, he will love you with all his heart. It’s not only that you are beautiful, but you are also kind and gentle. What man would not want a woman like you by his side?”

She wanted him to be right, but she lost hope of ever being happy three years ago when Prince Liam married Rosalyn and Hugo returned to war once his injury was healed. A year later, when Rosalyn and Prince Liam welcomed their firstborn, Nolan, Mina poured all her love into him. When she wasn’t busy helping the Fire Mages feed the bastard children who lived in the sewers or embroidering gowns or other items to gain some coin, she would go to the Royal Palace to play with Nolan.

Anette entered the Drawing Room. She seemed hesitant to talk.

“What is it?” Hugo asked her.

“A... a gentleman is here to see Duchess Mina.”

A man looking for her? Except for a Water Mage named Navin, a few Fire Mages, and the men from her family, she seldom talked to unknown men. Who could possibly be looking for her?

Hugo suddenly seemed to be of good humor. “A gentleman looking for my cousin, you say? Well, don’t make him wait.”

“But, young Duke, I have to forewarn you that—” Anette tried to warn Hugo of something, but he interrupted her.

“Whatever it is, I will deal with it later,” Hugo dismissed her.

Anette left to guide the guest to the Drawing Room.

“Let’s see if this gentleman of yours is worth our time,” Hugo started to tease Mina.

She would have replied, but her words died on her lips as her gaze went to the tall man who appeared in the doorframe.

Beastly shadows danced on the walls behind him.

The sun filtered through the windows and cast a halo of light around his short black hair, and for a moment, it looked like a golden crown. He wore black pants, a matching jacket, and a brown tunic; boots covered his feet. Embroidered on the jacket’s chest were three wolves’ heads. Next to him stood a big black wolf.

The man's piercing caught Mina's attention. He was a bastard. Not any bastard, but the one she saw Rosalyn with several times five years ago. Mina had tried to find out who he was and how he came to know Rosalyn, but he remained a mystery. She had tried to talk to Rosalyn about the people she was talking to, but it fell on deaf ears. When Rosalyn stopped going out so much, Mina thought that maybe her cousin was finally starting to act according to their family name, but she was starting to believe the reason was a different one—like the man in front of her joining the war.

Mina and Hugo stood.

“Commander Jayden,” Hugo said. “When did you arrive?”

Commander Jayden. The Bastard Commander, as many called him. The man who saved Hugo from being killed by the Necromancer.

The entire Kingdom of Nodor has praised his name since he defeated the Necromancer. A bastard born in a brothel at the port of Athea was now the savior of Nodor.

Everyone in Athea had been waiting for his arrival, many balls would be held in his honor.

The most important man in the kingdom, after King Baswein and Prince Liam, was in the Castex Mansion. But why was he looking for her? Mina did not know him.

“This morning.” The Commander sounded impatient.

“Just in time for breakfast. Join my cousin, Mina, and I,” Hugo invited him.

Commander Jayden entered the Drawing Room, and his wolf followed him. His gaze went from Mina to Hugo, his upper lip curling up, revealing his teeth, and his nostrils flared, his blue eyes turning gold for a moment. A mere trick of the light, as the sunlight was falling on his face.

A low growl came from the wolf.

The Commander frowned as if something bothered him. “I am not here to eat but to find my betrothed.”

Why would Commander Jayden look for his betrothed in the Castex's house?

Hugo glanced at Mina, a question on his face. Did her cousin think she was Commander Jayden's betrothed? “Oh. Mina made lemon pie. Have a slice while you tell us about your future bride.”

Commander Jayden's gaze rushed to the serving platter. "I only like apple pie. Regardless—"

Mina—who always acted like a proper lady—interrupted Commander Jayden. She didn't want to, but he made her nervous. "I made one with apples as well."

Commander Jayden grew even more impatient. "Duchess Castex. Where is she?"

Mina was confused. She wasn't the only one.

"You are looking at her," Hugo replied.

Commander Jayden threw Mina a disinterested look. She was used to it by now, and it rarely bothered her, but seeing the Commander do the same as any other man hurt her. "Not her. Rosalyn."

Rosalyn.

The Commander was looking for Rosalyn.

"Why are you looking for my sister?" Hugo wanted to know.

"She is the one who will soon become my wife."

Gods!

Blood rushed to Mina's ears. Commander Jayden was looking for Rosalyn. She was his betrothed? Surely, it was a mistake. When younger, Rosalyn was more imprudent and often talked to men as she loved to receive attention, but even she knew where to draw the line. Not that there was something wrong with Commander Jayden, but Rosalyn was married. Even if she weren't, the Commander was a bastard, and Duke Tedric would never accept one like him into the family. For Duke Tedric, reputation was everything. Thank the Gods he was away for a few days, for a tragedy would have surely happened if he had been home.

Hugo blinked once, then twice. "I beg your pardon?"

"She accepted a bracelet from me and promised to await my return. Yet the moment I set foot in Athea and heard of a tea party organized by Princess Rosalyn, I rushed right here, with my clothes still full of the dust from my long journey. So I ask again, where is my betrothed?"

Realizing the danger Rosalyn had put everyone in, Mina said harshly, "You already know. She is not here. There is nothing for you here. Please, leave and never return."

“She married another after she laid with me and became my woman and promised to wait for me?” Commander Jayden snarled.

Hugo turned pale. “She did what?”

Commander Jayden glared at Hugo. “You heard me.”

Mina was not versed in what happened between men and women when they retired to their chambers, but even she knew that men always knew if a woman was pure on the night of the consummation. So, if Rosalyn had been with Commander Jayden, how is it that Prince Liam didn't find out she wasn't a maiden when she wed him? Whatever the case was, it was a small mercy from the Gods, as the family would have fallen in disgrace if Prince Liam had learned of Rosalyn's indiscretion.

If only she had watched Rosalyn more closely, this could have been prevented.

“Even if that were true, she is the future queen of this nation.”

“And what of the promise she made to me?” Commander Jayden wanted to know.

Mina was starting to get a headache. “What of it?”

“We can compensate you,” Hugo said quickly. “We only ask for your discretion.”

“Discretion?” Commander Jayden pondered. “All my men know of Duchess Castex and me. How long until everything comes to light?”

Hugo turned pale as a sheet.

How many people knew about Rosalyn and Commander Jayden? If word got out...

“We can use the money my parents left me,” Mina suggested. “I am sure it is enough for everyone.”

“The only way to silence my men and me is for me to wed Duchess Castex,” Commander Jayden snarled.

‘Is he deaf?’ Mina wondered. “But...that's impossible.”

“Is it?” the Commander angrily asked.

“Commander Jayden,” Hugo made another attempt to calm the Commander, “I have no idea what my sister promised you, but she is not only a wife but a mother as well. Forget about her. You are the great hero of this nation, and you can marry anyone your heart desires.”

“Good. The one I want is Rosalyn.” The Commander turned on his heels and marched out of the Drawing Room. “Aksel, we are leaving,” he said, and the wolf followed him.

Under no circumstance could Commander Jayden go to the Royal Palace until he agreed not to say a word about him and Rosalyn. So many lives would be destroyed....

“Wait!” she yelled as the Commander and his wolf disappeared down the hallway.

Commander Jayden did not stop walking. In fact, he was walking so fast that Mina had to lift the skirt of her dress so she could run after him. Hugo followed her. The Commander moved so fast that he was out the front door by the time Mina made it into the hallway.

“Commander Jayden!” Mina yelled as hard as she could.

“I don’t think we can stop him,” Hugo said what Mina already knew.

She grabbed Hugo’s hand. “If we can’t stop him, we must arrive at the Royal Palace before him.”

When Mina and Hugo exited the mansion, Commander Jayden was already on top of his horse, galloping down the street, his black wolf running beside him.

“Damn it!” Hugo cursed. “Father took the carriage when he left.”

“We could rent one,” Mina suggested.

The Castex mansion was in the upper part of Athea, close to the bank, influential merchants, and other wealthy families. Most days, carriages could be found in front of the shops, but not that day.

Mina let out a curse. At any other moment, Hugo might have said something to her, but, just like her, his main focus was to get to the Royal Palace and stop Commander Jayden from doing something mad.

“If we are lucky, we will find a carriage further down the street,” Hugo said as he dragged Mina after him.

Those living in the upper part of the city usually had quiet lives, and most days passed similarly. The young Duke Castex and his cousin running down the street as if demons chased them was something that never occurred, and most likely, it would be gossiped about for a few days until something new to talk about arrived.

A carriage was in front of the bank. Hugo opened the door and helped Mina get in.

“To the Royal Palace,” Hugo instructed the coachman before getting inside. “And hurry!”

The carriage started moving.

Hugo drummed his fingers nervously on his right knee.

The Royal Palace was around forty-five minutes away from the Castex Mansion. The carriage would have to pass the bank, turn left at the marketplace, and keep straight on Artisans Street, then cross the bridge built over the Eyor River before reaching its destination.

The Eyor River, born from the great Ucias Lake, split Athea in two—the upper-class district and the poor district. The Royal Palace was built right in the middle of the two districts and close to the shore of Ucias Lake. In the middle of the lake was Isyleon Island, home to the Lyra bird—a bird that, as the legend said, united the hearts and souls of those who truly loved each other.

Another legend says that three thousand years ago, the Ucias Lake did not exist. Instead of the lake, a great Elven city, Athalon, stood proud. Elemental Elves lived and ruled Athalon. They were not only wise, but their magic was the strongest of all Aylarra, and soon, Athalon became the most advanced city ever to be built. When the Elemental Elves started boasting and believing they were greater than the Gods, one night, Addanos sent a flood, Inoss a great earthquake, while Beliar sent beasts to destroy Athalon and the Elemental Elves—it was the only time the three God Brothers agreed on anything. Shouts and wails were heard that night. When the Sun rose where Athalon once stood, there was a great lake with an island in the middle. People called it Ucias Lake—Wrath Lake because, in the Gods' language, ucias meant wrath. Springs flowing from the biggest mountain in Nodor, Athlas, feed the Ucias Lake.

Before the carriage entered the bridge, it stopped.

Hugo stuck his head out the window and yelled at the coachman, “Why did you stop?”

“There has been an accident, my Lord. I am afraid I can't continue until the road has been cleared.”

Hugo uttered a series of curses before saying to Mina, “We will have to run the rest of the way.”

They got out of the carriage; Hugo tossed a silver coin to the coachman before he and Mina rushed to the bridge.

As they ran on the bridge, they heard people talking about what caused the accident—the wheel of a cart that was taking supplies, probably to the Royal Palace broke. Part of the supplies ended up on the bridge while the rest were still in the cart. The racket that followed spooked horses, making them run into a carriage and the man inside it was injured.

Despite being in a hurry, Mina could not ignore someone who required help, as most people on the bridge were more interested in the cart's contents while the carriage coachman was trying to calm down the horses.

"We need to help," Mina said as she and Hugo reached the injured man.

Hugo cast the man a look. "There's no time. We need to get to the Royal Palace."

Hugo was right. She decided not to insist as every second counted, but her legs stopped moving as her eyes locked with a cold blue gaze, forcing Hugo to stop as well, as his hand was gripping hers.

"What now?" Hugo huffed, annoyed.

Mina jerked her head to her left. "Commander Jayden."

The Commander stopped his horse near the place of the accident and went to where Mina and Hugo were. His wolf trotted along, having those gathered around the carriage and the cart back away, for he was almost as big as a shadowbeast. Mina could swear he was much smaller back at the mansion.

The injured man was lying on the bridge and was breathing heavily while asking for help. At first glance, he appeared unharmed except for his left leg. The bone beneath the knee was broken, sticking out through the ripped pants.

Commander Jayden squatted next to him. "Looks painful, but a Fire Mage will heal you in a few minutes. Do you need me to send a message to your family informing them of the accident?"

"Don't touch me, you...you bastard," the man hissed.

The great hero of the Kingdom, the one everyone was waiting for, was already in Athea, but no one recognized him. People were probably waiting for a great party to be accompanying him, singing and shouting praises about him. Yet, all he received was being called a 'bastard' when he was trying to help.

It angered Mina. It always angered her when someone was treated poorly because they were born out of wedlock. Many bastards who lived in Athea labored in jobs no one else wanted in exchange for a few copper coins that would prolong their misery yet another day.

The black wolf growled, saliva dripping from his mouth.

"Aksel," the Commander said, and the wolf fell silent.

"Bastard!?" Hugo asked. "Do you even—"

Commander Jayden raised his left palm and Hugo stopped talking. Then, he took out a small flask and offered it to the man. "Rum. For the pain."

"I don't want anything from your filthy hands," hatred laced the man's voice.

"You should not speak like that to someone trying to help you," Mina snapped. Then, in a more calmed voice, she asked, "Should I call a Fire Mage? Or perhaps help you get more comfortable?"

The man looked at Mina with disgust. "I don't need the help of a bastard or a half-breed whore!"

It was not the first time someone had called her half-breed or whore. She'd heard worse. Many people in Athea compared gypsies to animals.

"Insult my cousin like that one more time, Earl Hornal, and I will break your other leg," Hugo threatened the man.

An Earl. Mina did not recognize him, but the expensive clothes and the many rings on his fingers let her know what type of person he was.

Commander Jayden looked up at Mina, grabbed the man's bone, and twisted it, making him yell in pain. Mina held his gaze. She did not approve of his methods, but the Earl needed to be taught a lesson of etiquette. "You can say anything you like about me, but talk to her like that again, and I will let my wolves eat you alive." Did he just defend her? Apart from Hugo and Ivy, no one did that for her. He put the flask back in his jacket and stood. "Aksel, we are leaving."

Mina stepped in front of him. "Can we, please, speak?"

"There is nothing left to say. You told me to leave, and I will do so as soon as I get what is mine."

The Commander went to his horse. Mina and Hugo went after him.

"Leave the past in the past, Commander. Whatever happened between you and her, it's over. Go home and think of my offer," Hugo said.

Commander Jayden laughed bitterly. "I am not a man that can be bought, Duke Castex. And things are over when I say so." He got on top of his horse.

"Think of what will happen if you go there while angry. Think of her child," Mina tried to reason with the Commander.

"Did she think of me when she accepted to become someone else's wife, knowing all too well she made a promise to me?"

Hugo grabbed the horse reins. "If a wife is what you want, I can recommend you to many wealthy families."

"I don't need your help to find a woman, as I chose my bride long ago." Commander Jayden jerked the reins free from Hugo. "Let's go, Aksel. We've wasted enough time already," he said, guiding the horse through the crowd on the bridge.

Mina would have gotten in front of the horse if not for Hugo stopping her. She stomped her foot on the stone bridge out of frustration. "What an insufferable man."

"What now? He won't listen to reason," Hugo said.

"I won't give up until he swears secrecy," Mina had made up her mind.

She ran, tugging Hugo after her.

They did not stop, not until they reached the Royal Palace.