

To heal a Rogue #Chapter 11: The Cousin 2 - Read

To heal a Rogue Chapter 11: The Cousin 2

LYSANDER

"Your father told me something last night," I said.

"My father told you many things last night, apparently." His voice stayed smooth. "I heard that the gathering was quite the occasion. My mother is dying, and he was partying."

"I did wonder why you or your mother weren't there."

"Hmmm." He looked at me after that. "What is your point, Lysander?"

I let it sit. I was not going to hand him the information his father had given me in the middle of a room with uncertain acoustics and the sentinels one corridor away. Whatever was happening here, whatever Johann knew or didn't know about his own parentage, this was not the conversation for this room.

"My point," I said, "is that an investigation requires more than a convenient suspect."

Johann was quiet for a moment. When he spoke again, something had shifted in his register, a degree of warmth dropping out of it.

"You are defending her quite vigorously," he said. "A rogue. A liar. Someone who walked into this estate pretending to be something she wasn't." He paused. "Have you found a new muse or something?"

I said nothing.

He folded his hands on the desk surface. "I thought you were consumed with that Meadows girl." He waved a hand. "And now the platinum-haired murderer has apparently captured your attention. Should I be concerned about your judgment, cousin? Or just your taste?"

Fia's face returned to me with the sharpness reserved for things that matter. Her words, her vision, delivered with that calm certainty she wore as armor. She had glimpsed this—not the exact moment, but its outline, its momentum. Who could have guessed the event would surge past my readiness when all I had done was tuck it away for later consideration?

Later had apparently been last night.

I thought about saying it. That she was my mate, and she did not kill his father, and the bond between us was sitting in my chest right now like a second heartbeat. I thought about what that sentence would do to the room, to the investigation, to every argument I was trying to build around her innocence. Johann would take it and fold it into a shape that suited him. He would hand it to the sentinels and the council and anyone else who needed a reason to dismiss everything I said, and she would stay in that room with wolfsbane burning into her wrists, and I would have handed him the tool to keep her there or have her head rolling.

"Your words," I said, "are irrelevant."

Johann raised an eyebrow.

"What is relevant," I continued, "is that your father made arrangements. Specific, witnessed arrangements, spoken in front of people whose names I have, regarding the succession of this seat." I looked at the chair he was sitting in. "Well... the Alpha King's seat. He was very clear about his intentions. The people in that room heard him clearly."

A chill settled between us, the air thinning as tension swept away any pretense of warmth.

Johann's hands were still folded on the desk, but the knuckles had changed. A small thing. I noticed it.

"You are attempting to sit in a seat," I said, "that your father explicitly and publicly reassigned last night and in front of witnesses, too." I held his gaze. "It would fascinate you to know your father named an heir."

The silence that followed pressed in, heavy and sharp, a presence with its own boundaries.

The silence lingered.

Johann did not blink.

For the first time since entering the library, the effortless confidence seemed to crack, not visibly enough for most people to notice, but enough for me. His jaw tightened. His fingers pressed together on the desk.

Neither of us looked away.

"Well.. Okay? I am more interested in getting justice for my father's barbaric murder than inheriting his seat currently. This talk about reassigning, too, who else could it be but me?"

Heavy footsteps crossed the room.

"That is enough."

The voice cut through the tension like a blade.

A royal elder stepped between us before either of us could respond. Age had bent his shoulders slightly, but not his authority. Silver hair framed a face carved by decades of leadership and conflict. Behind him, two more elders stalked closer, their expressions grim.

The elder looked from Johann to me.

Then he sighed.

"By the Moon, I can feel the hostility from where I stand."

Johann leaned back in the library chair he sat in. "I was unaware we required supervision, Elder."

"Clearly you do."

The elder's sharp gaze settled on him.

"Your father has not even been dead half a day, and already, his son and his favorite

nephew are preparing to tear chunks out of each other."

When neither of us answered, he nodded once.

"Good. Since neither of you intends to act with sense, I will do it for you."

He turned his back to the desk and addressed us both.

"The Elder Circle is convening an emergency session immediately."

The words settled heavily in the room.

No surprise there.

The murder of Uncle demanded it.

The elder continued.

"The King's death, the matter of a temporary regent before succession matters, the prisoner currently being held below this estate, and several other concerns require discussion." His eyes narrowed. "Proper discussion. Not whatever this is."

Johann's expression darkened slightly. "The succession is not complicated. I am my father's only son after all."

"No?" The elder asked, sharing a look with the others.

"No."

The elder laughed once. It contained no humor.

"The fact that you believe that is precisely why we are having this meeting."

Johann opened his mouth, which caused the elder to raise a hand.

"No, my Prince."

Those words stopped him. Then the elder looked toward me.

"Alpha Lysander."

I straightened.

"You will attend."

"Of course."

The elder nodded.

The ambiguity of it all was pissing Johann off, and you could tell from his face. He was not going to let it go either. He needed to know. So Johann spoke.

"And why pray tell," he asked calmly, "would my cousin be there?"

Tip: You can use left, right, A and D keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

To heal a Rogue #Chapter 12: Surface Pressure -

Read To heal a Rogue Chapter 12: Surface Pressure

LYSANDER

The elders were doing something I had never seen elders do before.

They were being evasive.

These were men and women who had presided over succession wars, border disputes, and the kind of political ugliness that made ordinary conflict look like a disagreement over seating arrangements. I had heard stories. It was in this same circle that an elder had once told an Alpha King to his face that his decree was illegitimate, and the man absorbed it without flinching, because that was the weight the royal Elder Circle carried, and everyone in every room understood it. They did not hedge. They did not shuffle papers, exchange glances, or suddenly find the grain of the library table deeply interesting.

They were doing all of those things right now.

Johann had noticed.

He stood at his end of the table with his arms crossed and his jaw working, watching the elders not answer him with the expression of a man who had always gotten answers when he wanted them and was finding the absence of that deeply, personally offensive.

"Is someone going to speak?" he said. "Or are we all simply going to sit here and breathe at each other?"

One Elder looked up from the table. "The matters at hand will be addressed in the circle, my Prince. In full. In order."

"That is not an answer."

"It is the answer available right now."

Johann's mouth pressed flat. He looked around the table, and I watched him look, watched him read each face and find nothing useful in any of them, and I watched the particular frustration of a man who understood that something was happening around him that he had not been told about.

A tightness tugged at my chest, uneasy and insistent.

Johann had grown up knowing this seat was his. He had sat through every briefing, every ceremony, and every interminable state function with the understanding that all of it was preparation for something real, something that had his name on it. His father had deliberately and carefully built that expectation in him over decades, and then, without telling him, handed it to someone else in a private room on the last night of his life.

That was not Johann's fault.

None of the foundation of this was Johann's fault.

Guilt pressed against my ribs until I remembered the hand at her throat, the measured grip, the gentle voice declaring criminals unworthy of breath. Then the guilt retreated, and I let it go.

My uncle had made a choice. He had made it clearly, in front of witnesses, and for reasons he had explained to me directly, and whatever Johann's feelings about it were, that choice existed, and I was going to honor it. Not because I wanted the throne. I had been sincere about that in the library last night, and I remained sincere about it now. But

my uncle was dead, and the girl who had not killed him was in a holding cell with wolfsbane eating into her wrists, and Johann was sitting in this library chair making decisions with no grief in sight. None of that was a situation I could leave alone.

I leaned forward.

"I would hope," I said, to the table more than to anyone specifically, "that everyone present remembers what my uncle said last night. I would also hope that no one is having jitters."

The elders looked at me.

Johann also looked at me.

"He was specific," I continued. "He was deliberate. He said what he said in front of people he trusted, and he chose that moment and that gathering carefully." I paused, let that land. "A man like my uncle did not do anything without a reason. He especially did not make succession declarations without one." I looked at the table surface and kept my voice conversational, almost mild. "I think about why he felt the urgency to say it when he did. Why that night? Why not a formal document through the council, why not a quiet transfer through the proper channels?" I looked up. "It almost suggests he understood that there was no time for the proper channels. That something was coming that would close that window."

The silence that followed had a particular texture.

Every elder at the table turned, in sequence, and looked at Johann.

Nobody said a word.

They just looked.

Johann's face went through several things very quickly. I watched the understanding arrive, watched him parse what I had just implied with a sentence that had technically accused him of nothing, and watched the blood leave his face for a moment before the color came rushing back in a way that had nothing to do with embarrassment.

"What," he said quietly, "exactly are you suggesting?"

"I'm not suggesting anything," I said. "I'm reflecting on my uncle's choices."

"You are standing in a room full of elders, implying that I—" He stopped. His voice had risen by half, and he caught it and pulled it back, and that act of catching it cost him something visible. "You are implying that my father's death was anticipated. And you are implying that the anticipation pointed somewhere specific."

"I said none of that."

"You said all of it."

He was right. I had. The elders were still looking at him.

Johann turned to them, and the fury in his face was real, raw in a way I had not seen from him yet tonight. "Are you going to say something? Any of you? Or are you going to stand there and let him imply whatever he likes while you stare at me like I'm already convicted of something?"

Another Elder opened his mouth, but Johann cut him off because he could already tell what the bullshit would be about. "Don't tell me it will be addressed in the circle."

This caused the Elder to close his mouth.

Johann turned to me and circled the table—not hurried, not relaxed, but with the purpose of someone who had chosen his path and would not turn back. He stopped close, so close the conversation belonged only to us now.

"Just because we share blood," he said, very quietly, "does not mean I will let you disrespect me. Not here. Not in front of them. Not in the building where my father's body is still warm."

I looked at him.

"Do we?" I said.

Two words. He heard every one of them.

His fist moved. Fast, and it would have connected cleanly if I had been anyone else or if my reflexes had been anything less than what years of surviving my father had made them. I caught his hand at the wrist, mid-swing, and held it, and we stood there in front of the entire Elder present, locked in something that was one degree away from the thing they were all about to start shouting about.

They started shouting about it.

"Enough." The most vocal elder was on his feet. Two others followed. "Enough, both of you. This is a library. This is sacred ground, not a training yard. You will conduct yourselves accordingly, or you will be removed and the decisions made without your presence."

Johann pulled his hand back. I released it.

His chest was moving. He smoothed his jacket with both hands, one slow pass, and turned to the table.

"You're right," he said. His voice had recovered its surface. "You're absolutely right. I will not trade blows with this barbarian." He straightened fully and looked at me one more time, something cold and final in it, and then he looked at the sentinels who had now shown up and were standing along the far wall. "Detain him."

Nobody moved.

Johann looked at the sentinels, then looked at the elders.

The sentinels also looked at the elders.

"That," One elder said, "would not be possible."

Johann's head turned slowly. "I beg your pardon."

"Alpha King Cornelius was explicit in his declaration last night, my Prince." The Elder's voice was careful and even. "Witnessed by members of the royal elder's circle who were present. Alpha Lysander of Lily of the Valley was named heir to the throne. His presence at this meeting is not optional. His detainment is not something we can authorize currently."

The room held its breath.

Johann stood very still.

"No," he said.

The Elder said nothing.

"No." That came louder this time. Johann looked around the table, face moving through disbelief before it arrived at something harder. "No, that is not possible. My father would not have—" He stopped and then started again. "He would have told me. He would have said something. I am his son."

An elder to my left nodded once. "Several of us were in that gathering, Johann. We heard it directly."

Another one murmured confirmation. Then another.

Johann's composure did not break or shatter. It simply failed, like a light switched off, revealing not grief or confusion but something raw, furious, and sharply focused beneath.

"My father," he said, each word placed with precision, "was an old man under considerable stress who had just lost his sister's husband under traumatic circumstances. Whatever he said in whatever room, the legal succession passes through the will. Through documentation. Through legitimate process." He looked at me. "Not through the word of a man who was clearly not thinking clearly in the final hours of his life."

I said nothing.

I was watching him.

I had a working theory, and I had spent the last twenty minutes testing it, pushing at the edges of it, waiting for the pressure to produce something I could use. Guilt produced specific behaviors. Guilt under pressure produced more specific ones. I had seen enough of both to know what I was looking for.

Johann had shown me rage, hunger, and the desperate edge of a man whose entire identity had just been stripped and handed to someone else.

That was damning. It was also, if I was being precise with myself, not conclusive.

Ambition alone was not proof. Men killed for thrones, but many simply longed for them. Johann had every reason to believe this one was his, without needing to hasten fate.

I watched him argue with an Elder about the will and the documentation and the legitimate process, his voice controlled now, his hands still, working the political angle with the fluency of someone who had been trained for exactly this kind of room.

He was either guilty and extraordinarily composed, or he was innocent and watching his inheritance dissolve in real time.

The difference mattered enormously.

I just didn't know which one it was yet. And until I did, I needed to play accordingly.

Tip: You can use left, right, A and D keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

To heal a Rogue #Chapter 13: Once upon a night - Read To heal a Rogue Chapter 13: Once upon a night

BONNIE

The two Sentinels dragging me to the holding block made it clear from the start that comfort was not on the itinerary.

The first Sentinel gripped my hair before we even left the library, using it like a leash on something beneath him, jerking my head at angles that made my neck howl just to keep me moving at his pace. The second hovered behind me, close enough to make it clear this was about dominance, not security. Every few steps, he shoved me between the shoulder blades, hard enough to send me stumbling into the first one's hold, earning another vicious tug for my trouble.

"Walk straight," the first one said, like I had a choice in the matter, with my wrists still bound and my balance compromised by three gunshot wounds that my body was refusing to heal.

I kept silent. Words cost more energy than I could spare, each one clawing its way up from somewhere far below my throat.

By the time we hit the stairwell to the lower block, the second Sentinel had had enough of shoving and escalated. His boot hooked the back of my knee on the third step, sending me crashing down, my bound hands useless, my shoulder slamming into stone where the ghost pain from the bullet still slept under the muscle. The pain that exploded from the impact was a new, raw kind, sharper than the gunshots, and I heard a sound escape me that I didn't recognize as my own.

"Get up," the first one said, already hauling me by the rope around my wrists, which dragged the wolfsbane-soaked fiber tighter against skin that was already raw and weeping.

I forced myself upright. Every alternative promised something uglier.

They put me in a cell at the end of a corridor lined with iron bars and bad lighting, and the second one used the opportunity of getting me through the door to drive his knee into my stomach, once, with no warning and no provocation beyond the fact that he could. I folded around the impact and hit the floor of the cell, and the door clanged shut above the sound of my own breathing.

I had been hurt worse than this. That was the strange comfort I reached for as I lay there on cold stone with my body screaming from six different directions. I had survived things that should have killed a person twice over, things from before I had a life that meant anything, things I didn't let myself revisit unless I was bleeding on a floor somewhere and needed a reason to believe I'd survive the current version of bleeding on a floor.

This was bad. It wasn't the worst.

I hauled myself upright against the wall and started running the numbers, because cold calculation had always kept me alive longer than instinct ever did.

I was the perfect ending to this story. That was the cold center of it, the part I kept circling back to no matter how many times I tried to think my way around it. A dead King. A scandal nobody wanted examined too closely, not with an infertility confession and a bastard prince sitting somewhere in the wreckage of it. A rogue retainer who had lied about her gender to get into the estate, found alone in the room with the body and the weapon.

I wasn't a suspect. I was a solution. The kind of solution that lets everyone go back to their lives without anyone having to ask harder questions about who actually wanted Alpha King Cornelius dead and why.

My breathing was coming too fast, and I knew it, the rapid, shallow pull of air that didn't actually get anywhere useful, and I pressed my back harder into the wall and tried to slow it down.

Why hadn't I just run?

The question tore through me, sharper than any wound. I'd had the corridor, the open door, the empty hallway—every chance to vanish into the night and never look back. Instead, my traitorous hand glowed blue and I walked toward a sound that should have sent me running the other way.

I closed my eyes.

That was when the memory came back. Not gently. It arrived the way drowning arrived, all at once and with no warning, my own voice from an hour I couldn't fully place anymore, saying I can help you, and underneath it, something else. A different voice. Worn thin and fading, but present.

Forget fixing me.

I sat very still.

Fix yourself. Tell Lysander he has to take the throne before the children of the night sink their claws into it.

I opened my eyes and stared at the bars across from me and tried to figure out if that had actually happened or if my brain, starved of blood and running on fumes, had manufactured something out of panic and proximity to a dying man.

When I had tried to save him, I had gone unconscious, and my gifts had decided to save just me. That was what happened.

Children of the night.

The phrase lingered on my tongue like a half-remembered name, something I'd heard before in another life, its source lost to me. It felt ancient, more like a nursery whisper than something spoken in a blood-soaked library, and that mismatch unsettled me more than the words themselves.

I let it go. I had bigger problems than my delusions of the half-formed words from a man who might have already been past the point of meaning anything he said.

The bigger problem, the one circling everything else, was Alpha Lysander.

He knew I was innocent. I had felt that through the bond, whatever that bond actually was, some kind of certainty passing between us that didn't need words. He'd said it out loud, in front of the sentinels, in front of his cousin. That I was innocent.

In a just world, I guess that would count for something. But this was no just world.

It wouldn't matter. I knew men like him, even though I'd never personally known one this close. Royal blood didn't make people braver. It made them more careful about what they spent their courage on, and a half-feral retainer with a stolen identity and platinum hair wasn't going to rank high on the list of things worth burning political capital for. He'd say the right things in private rooms and lose every public fight that mattered, and I would still end up exactly where I currently was.

The mate thing nagged at me anyway, even now, even with my whole body and mind falling apart around. It was an absurd thing to be distracted by. I pushed it down hard, the same way I pushed down everything that didn't have an immediate use.

What I needed was leverage.

The thought arrived with its own small, cold clarity, and I turned it over slowly, testing its weight. The King's last words. Whatever they actually were, whatever I'd actually heard versus hallucinated in the fog of blood loss, they were the one thing I had that nobody else had. And Alpha Lysander, whatever else he was, had clearly been close enough to his uncle that the words might mean something to him. It might be enough to make him chase a thread instead of cutting my strings.

It was a gamble built on nothing but maybes. Maybe I'd heard right. Maybe I hadn't conjured the whole thing in the fog of dying.

But a gamble was better than nothing, and nothing was what I currently had.

I hauled myself to the bars and called out to the sentinel stationed at the corridor's end.

"Hey." My voice came out rough. I tried again, louder. "I need to speak to Alpha Lysander."

The sentinel turned his head, slow and unimpressed.

"I know what the King said before he died," I said. "It matters. You need to get him down here."

He walked over, slow and deliberate, crouching to bring his face level with mine through the bars.

"You're a lying little bitch wearing a man's name," he said, almost pleasantly, "and you killed the only good King this pack has had in forty years." He spat through the bars. It hit my cheek, and I didn't have the energy left to flinch away from it. "You'll talk to whoever they send to drag you to your execution. That's the only conversation you've got left."

Something inside me that had lain still for ages finally snapped loose.

"At least I didn't spend my life on my knees for a paycheck," I said, voice trembling, but my aim true. "You hit women tied up in cells because it's the only fight you can win. Pathetic."

I didn't get to finish enjoying it.

The butt of his rifle slammed through the bars and cracked against my temple. The world spun sideways, and the floor rushed up, scattering my thoughts into static.

I lay with my cheek pressed to cold stone, vision swimming, blood warm near my ear, and the darkness behind my eyes began to fill with sound.

A rhyme. The same one. Closer now, clearer than it had been in the library, like the dizziness had knocked something loose enough to let it through whole.

*Mother Moon once walked below,
where rivers ran, and wild things grew.
She loved the wolves, she walked as kin,
and swore to guard the blood within.
But claws drew deep, and hearts were torn,
And grief was born before the dawn.
So Mother Moon took up the night,
and wrapped her children in silver light.
Moonlight for the faithful heart,
a blessing no foe can tear apart.
But for the ones who lied, who bled, who preyed,
she carved a darker, hungrier shade.
Beware, beware when daylight dies,
and silver burns in golden eyes.
For when the moon climbs high and white,
the Night children gather, and they bite.*

I didn't know where the words ended, and my own skull began.

I lay on the cell floor, blood in my ear and a dead king's hum rattling in my skull. Beneath the pain, a stubborn part of me clung to the rhyme like a rope tossed into dark water, because right now, it was the only thing I had that no one else did.

A stupid childhood rhyme.

Tip: You can use left, right, A and D keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

To heal a Rogue #Chapter 14: Will reading - Read To heal a Rogue Chapter 14: Will reading

LYSANDER

Johann was not done. I could see that the moment his mouth opened again, the way his jaw set before the words even came out, like he'd rehearsed this particular argument in his head while the elders were still speaking.

"Legitimate process," he said again, as if repetition alone could make it true. "Through documentation. Through the will. That is how succession has worked in this pack for over four hundred years, and I refuse to stand here and let a verbal declaration made in a room full of half-drunk elders override four centuries of precedent."

"Half-drunk," one of the elders muttered, offended.

"Oh please...You know what I mean."

"I genuinely do not think I do."

I watched Johann's hands curl at his sides. He was so close to losing whatever composure he had left, and I understood, in some distant part of me that still had room for understanding, why. His entire life had been built on an assumption. That assumption had been dismantled in a single night, first by his father's private confession, now by mine, with these men to back me up and soon in front of even more powerful witnesses who would repeat every word of this to their own packs before the week was out.

But understanding him did not mean I trusted him. Not with a killer loose somewhere in this estate, not with Bonnie bleeding into wolfsbane rope three floors below us.

"Then let us read the will," I said.

The room went quiet in a different way than before. The silence that came this time was not the tense kind. If I could link it to anything, it would be surprise.

Johann turned to look at me slowly, like he thought he'd misheard.

"What?"

"The will," I said again, keeping my voice even. "If documentation is what satisfies you, then let us produce the documentation. Your father kept a will. You seem sure of it and so am I. Every Alpha King does. If it says what you believe it says, then this entire conversation ends and you have your throne with my full support." I spread my hands slightly, palms up, an offering. "If it does not, then perhaps you will finally listen to the people who were standing in that room last night."

Johann studied me. I watched something calculating move behind his eyes, the same look he used to give me across a chessboard when we were boys, and he was trying to decide if I'd set a trap or simply made a mistake he could exploit.

He was trying to figure out why I would offer this. Why would I risk a document that could, in theory, still name him?

The truth was simpler than he'd ever guess. I did not want the throne. I had never wanted the throne. What I wanted was this argument over, so I could get back down to the cell where my mate was kneeling in wolfsbane rope with three unhealed gunshot wounds, and every minute I spent trading barbs with my cousin in a library that still smelled faintly of his father's blood was a minute I resented losing.

Plus... Alpha Cornelius was a very meticulous man. The thing he spewed was not by accident. I knew somewhere deep in my heart that the will would already name me heir.

"Is that necessary?" one of the elders asked, glancing between us. "We have already

confirmed the verbal declaration through multiple witnesses. A written will would only—"It is necessary," Johann said, cutting him off, "because I want it in writing. I want it read aloud, in this room, so there is no ambiguity for anyone who was not present last night." He looked at me again, and something almost like triumph flickered across his face. "My cousin is trying to intimidate me into silence with implications and theater. It will not work. Read the will."

I said nothing. Let him have the small victory of thinking this was his idea.

An elder sighed and gestured to one of the sentinels stationed near the door. "Reach out to Beta Bradley's Gamma. Tell him we require the will reading to begin immediately, by order of the Elder Circle."

The sentinel nodded once and left at a fast walk, boots echoing down the corridor.

Then we waited.

I had never known silence to have this sort of texture before, but the one that settled into the library did. It sat heavy and sharp at the same time, thick with everything nobody was saying. Johann paced a slow line near the window, arms crossed, jaw working. The elders murmured among themselves in low voices that never quite carried far enough for me to catch whole sentences. I stood near the desk and did not pace, because pacing would have told Johann something I did not want him to see.

The minutes stretched. Long enough that I started counting them, which was its own kind of torture, because counting minutes meant thinking about what those minutes were doing to her downstairs. Wolfsbane did not care about political theater. It kept burning whether or not I was standing in a library waiting for a piece of paper.

Finally, footsteps in the corridor. Measured, unhurried, the particular cadence of someone who had spent decades cultivating the impression that nothing could rush him.

High Gamma Cormac stepped through the doorway, carrying a leather folio under one arm, his silver hair combed with meticulous precision despite the hour, his face set in the practiced solemnity of a man who had delivered bad news to powerful people more times than he could count.

The bond hit me the second he crossed the threshold.

It was not gradual. It came like a blade between the ribs, sharp and sudden, a pulse of something raw and wordless that had nothing to do with the room I was standing in. Pain. Hers. Not the ordinary ache of wolfsbane doing its slow work, but something acute, a spike layered on top of everything else, and my stomach dropped straight through the floor.

I kept my face still. It cost me more than it should have.

"Cold feet, cousin?" Johann asked, and I realized he'd been watching me the whole time, waiting for exactly this kind of crack to appear.

"No," I said.

"You look pale."

"I look the way anyone would look when their uncle has been dead less than a day." I met his eyes and held them, daring him to push further. "Perhaps you should try it. It might improve your color as well."

Johann's mouth thinned, but he did not answer, which was a small mercy.

I breathed through it. Whatever was happening to her, I could not fix it from this room. I could not fix it by unraveling in front of Johann and the elders and the Gamma, who was currently laying out papers on the desk with the unhurried precision of a man who had done this a hundred times before. All I could do was hold the shape of myself together long enough to get through this and get to her, because that was the entire point of standing in this library and enduring my cousin's insinuations. To save her. Everything else was noise.

"I spoke with Beta Bradley directly," Cormac said, addressing the room in a voice trained to fill spaces without shouting. "He granted permission for the reading to proceed immediately, given the circumstances." He glanced up, and for the first time something human moved across his professional composure. "I am sorry for your losses. Both of you."

Johann said nothing. I inclined my head once.

Cormac opened the folio.

"This is the last will and testament of Alpha King Cornelius De'Lune," he said, "notarized and sealed by my own hand, dated—" he paused, checked the page, and something flickered behind his eyes before he continued, "—dated three weeks ago."

Tip: You can use left, right, A and D keyboard keys to browse between chapters.

To heal a Rogue #Chapter 15: Breeder - Read To heal a Rogue Chapter 15: Breeder

LYSANDER

Three weeks.

I felt Johann go still beside me.

Cormac read through the preamble in the flat, practiced cadence of someone who had read a hundred wills and buried whatever feelings the words might have stirred a long time ago. Small and big estate holdings were mentioned. Personal effects. Small bequests to members of the household staff who had served for decades. None of it mattered. We both knew what we were actually waiting for, and Cormac knew it too, because his voice slowed slightly as he reached the section that mattered.

"To the matter of succession," he read, "I, Cornelius De'Lune, name my nephew, Alpha Lysander Asker of Lily of the Valley, as sole heir to the throne of the Alpha King, effective immediately upon my death, superseding any prior designation, understanding, or expectation held by any other party."

The room did not breathe.

"All rights, titles, and responsibilities associated with the crown pass to Alpha Lysander in full. This includes command of the royal guard, authority over the Elder Circle's convening power, and stewardship of the supreme pack treasury."

Cormac turned the page.

There was no mention of Johann anywhere in it. Not his name, not his claim, not so much as a bequest of personal effects that might have softened the blow. There was no mention of Queen Edelina either. Not a dowager's allowance, not a residence, not a single line acknowledging thirty years of marriage.

It was as if my uncle had methodically erased them both from the page.

Johann came up out of his chair so fast it scraped hard against the floor.

"That is not possible," he said. His voice had lost every trace of the smooth control he'd been wearing all morning. "My mother is his wife. I am his son. There is no version of a will that should omit us entirely, none, not even if he hated us, and he did not hate us—"

"The document speaks for itself, my Prince," Cormac said carefully.

"When." Johann's hands were flat on the desk now, and he leaned into them, into Cormac, close enough that the Gamma took an involuntary step back. "When was this amended. Three weeks ago, you said. Something happened three weeks ago. What happened three weeks ago?"

Cormac's expression closed like a door. "Only the Beta who witnessed the amendment would know that, my Prince. I merely hold the document and read what is written."

Johann stared at him. Then at the will. Then, slowly, at me.

I let the silence sit there for a moment before I moved. I wanted him to feel every second of it, the way he'd made sure I felt every second of his contempt since the moment he'd walked into this room.

Then I crossed the floor, unhurried, and I took the chair he'd just vacated. I settled into it the way he had earlier, with the same deliberate ease, and I watched something in his face crack clean down the middle when he registered exactly what I was doing.

"With that resolved," I said, folding my hands on the desk the way my uncle used to, "I believe our priority should be finding the actual killers. Two masked men. One with a distinguishing scar. That seems like considerably more useful information than continuing to relitigate a will that has now been read aloud, notarized, and confirmed by the man who witnessed it."

Johann said nothing. He looked like a man standing in the wreckage of a house he'd been building his whole life, only just now understanding that the foundation had rotted out from under him weeks ago, without his knowledge, while he slept in a room down the hall.

One of the elders cleared his throat.

"There is a complication," he said.

I looked up. "Which is?"

"The people will not be pacified by an ongoing investigation, Alpha Lysander. Not tonight, not this week. Word has already spread through the estate and beyond it. Visiting Alphas and Lunas arrived this morning and will continue arriving enmasse to pay respects. They will expect resolution, not an open question hanging over the new King's first days." He exchanged a glance with the elder beside him. "There must be a perpetrator. Even if the true culprits remain at large, the people require someone to hold accountable while the real investigation continues quietly beneath it."

I understood immediately what he meant, and it turned something cold in my stomach.

"You mean her."

"The evidence already points to her. The optics are, unfortunately, convenient."

"She is innocent."

"That may well be true. But truth and public necessity are not always the same animal, Alpha Lysander, and you will learn quickly that a King who cannot manage the second often loses the ability to pursue the first."

I stared at him. "That is cruel."

"It is," he agreed, without hesitation, without apology. "It is also how the world works, and has worked, long before either of us stood in this room."

I thought about her kneeling on that library floor with rope biting into raw skin, telling me she hadn't done it, and I had believed her, had felt the truth of it through the bond like a struck note. I was not going to let her hang for a crime committed by some criminal.

"If we must give them something," I said slowly, "then give them something kinder than an execution. Whatever punishment satisfies the visiting packs without ending her life."

The elders exchanged another look, longer this time, weighted with something I did not like the shape of.

"There is precedent," the eldest of them finally said. "An old tradition, from before the current codes were written. Rogues who infiltrated packs to commit crimes against them were kept as breeders by the Alpha who caught them. A punishment, not a marriage. The offender was stripped of any virtue and standing they had entirely, and made into a caste beneath even the Omegas, bound to bear the Alpha's line as penance for the crime against his house." He watched my face carefully as he spoke. "It would resolve the matter without bloodshed. And frankly, Alpha Lysander, it would serve you politically. You have effectively taken a beloved prince's inheritance from him. The people will need something to soften that. Nostalgia for old tradition tends to do exactly that."

It disgusted me. Every syllable of it landed somewhere ugly in my chest, the casual cruelty of dressing up ownership as mercy, of calling degradation a kindness because the alternative was worse.

But it would keep her alive. It would keep her close, out of a cell, out of wolfsbane rope, within reach of whatever protection I could actually provide once I held real authority instead of a verbal claim contested by half the room.

"Fine," I said, before I could think better of it. "Do it."

The eldest elder nodded, satisfied, already moving on to logistics in his mind, I could tell.

"Good. Tonight, then. The visiting Alphas and Lunas are already gathered for the mourning rites. We will present her before them then, formally, with the title conferred in full view of witnesses, so there is no question of the arrangement later."

Something in his tone made my spine go rigid.

"Present her?" I repeated. "Tonight. In front of the visiting court?"

"Yes, Alpha Lysander. Is there a problem?"

I sat up straighter in my uncle's chair.

"What do you mean is there a problem? There clearly is!"

Tip: You can use left, right, A and D keyboard keys to browse between chapters.