

TO HEAL A ROGUE

Chapter 111: Memory 3

BONNIE

The darkness behind my eyelids didn't stay dark for long.

I pushed through it the same way I'd pushed through everything else in my life. Through the fear. Through the doubt. Through that constant gnawing voice that whispered I wasn't enough, would never be enough, had never been meant to exist in the first place. I shoved all of it aside and kept reaching.

My feet found solid ground sooner than I expected. Cold tile pressed against my bare soles, the kind of institutional flooring that existed in hospitals and government buildings and places where people waited for bad news. I opened my eyes.

The room was small. Smaller than small. A closet with delusions of grandeur. It had white walls that had yellowed somewhere around the edges, a single bed with a metal frame pushed against the right wall, and a sink mounted in the corner that looked like it had been installed in the 1950s and never updated. A mirror hung above the sink, but it was angled wrong, or I was standing wrong, because all I could see in it was the ceiling.

I knew this room. I'd never been here before, but I knew it anyway. It existed in that part of my memory that held things I'd tried to bury so deep they'd never see sunlight again.

Lily of the Valley's Omega quarters.

"Interesting choice." A voice said.

The voice came from everywhere and nowhere, sliding up my spine like a finger drawn through water. I spun around, my heart hammering against my ribs hard enough to hurt.

He was forming in front of me. Like someone had spilled a bag of puzzle pieces made of smoke and light and decided to put them together in the shape of a man. First came the shoulders, broad and angled under a shirt I couldn't quite focus on. Then the chest, the legs, the arms hanging loose at his sides. Last came the face, and when it finished sharpening into focus, I stopped breathing.

He had white hair. It was not the white of age, but the white of winter. Of fresh snow. Of moonlight on marble. It fell around his face in a cut that stopped just above his jawline, messy in a way that looked intentional, styled to suggest he didn't care how it looked even though he clearly did. His eyebrows matched. White as bone. His lashes too, casting pale shadows on cheeks that held no color whatsoever. He could have been carved from ice.

He... looked like me.

The thought hit before I could stop it, before I could strangle it dead the way I needed to. The pale hair. The lack of pigment. The sharp angles of cheekbones that could cut glass. I saw my own reflection in mirrors when the light hit wrong, when I looked sick or tired or terrified. I saw it staring back at me now from a stranger's face, and I wanted to scream.

He clapped. Slow. Three times. The sound echoed in the tiny room, bouncing off those yellowed walls and coming back distorted.

"Good job." He smiled, and his teeth were too white, too even. Like a predator's teeth in a predator's mouth. "Truly. I mean that sincerely. Do you have any idea how many people have tried to force me into a dreamscape over the centuries? How many witches and warlocks and desperate little magic users thought they could summon my great self and make him dance?"

He took a step closer. I didn't step back. I refused to step back. My hands curled into fists at my sides, nails digging crescents into my palms.

"None of them succeeded," he continued. "Not one. And yet here you are, barely more than a child, dragging me into this..." He glanced around, nostrils flaring like he smelled something rotten. "...charming little space you've constructed. This is your doing, I assume? The place where you feel the strongest in your head and your dreams. Your safe place?"

I didn't answer. My throat had closed up, seized by muscles that wouldn't relax.

He walked to the bed and ran one finger along the metal frame. Dust came away on his skin, gray and powdery. "It is sad if this is where you feel safest. In a room barely big enough to turn around in? With a sink that probably drips and a bed with springs that stab you in the back?" He laughed, but there was no humor in it. Just observation. Just cold assessment. "What a shame. What an absolute tragedy. To have access to the kind of power that could reshape reality, and this is what your subconscious builds as your fortress."

"Shut up." My voice sounded strange. Thick. Like I'd been crying, though I hadn't. Not yet.

He turned to face me fully, and his eyes caught the light. They were steel and dark.

"Make me," he invited.

I didn't think. I'd spent too long thinking. Too long hesitating. Fia's voice echoed in my head, telling me to believe, to take charge, telling me the power was mine if I would just accept it.

I reached for the gift of small miracles. For that pulsing thing beneath my sternum that I'd spent my whole life trying to ignore. It came faster this time, eager, and hungry. It remembered what we'd done to the dresser, and it wanted more.

The pressure built behind my eyes, hot and alive. I pushed it outward, not with my hands but with my will, with my anger, with every scream I'd ever swallowed because screaming wasn't practical and crying wouldn't fix anything.

He flew backward. His body left the ground completely, legs kicking out for purchase that didn't exist, and he slammed into the wall above the sink with a crack that sounded like thunder trapped in a jar. I held him there, pinned against those yellowed tiles, my hands raised in front of me like I was conducting an orchestra only I could hear.

"Listen to me, you bastard." My voice shook, but I didn't care. I stepped closer, close enough to see the surprise register in his eyes, close enough to watch his chest struggle to expand against the pressure crushing it. "You have been hunting me. Hurting me. Making me bleed in my sleep like some kind of coward who can only attack when I'm unconscious and can't fight back."

I pushed harder. Something in his ribs made a wet, sharp sound. He winced, but that smile stayed plastered across his face like it was painted there.

"Those days are over," I warned him. "You will never touch me again. You will never crawl inside my head again. You will never make me bleed again. Because if you do, I will find you just like I did now, and I will do worse than this. I will crush you until you're nothing but paste on the floor. Do you understand me?"

He hung there, suspended by my will, by the power that shimmered in the air between us like a bubble of heat rising from summer asphalt. For a moment, neither of us moved. The only sound was his breathing, labored and wet, and the drip of the faucet I'd somehow summoned into existence, falling into the sink with a rhythm that matched my pulse.

Then he laughed.

It started as a chuckle, low in his throat, and built into something that shook his whole body despite the invisible vise I'd locked around his chest. He laughed until blood appeared at the corner of his mouth, bright red against white skin, and still he laughed.

"Oh," he gasped out, wheezing slightly. "Oh, that's perfect. That's absolutely perfect. Look at you. Look at what you can do when you stop being afraid."

"Stop talking."

"As I said before, make me," he said again, but softer now. Intimate. Like we were sharing a secret. "But you can't, can you? You can hold me here. You can hurt me. You could probably kill me if you decided to commit to it. Though I will not let you. But you can't

make me stop speaking. Because part of you wants to hear what I have to say. Part of you is dying to know why you're still alive even though I had the chance."

I pushed harder. His ribs creaked. A real sound, organic and awful. He should have been screaming. Any normal person would have been screaming. But he just kept smiling, blood trailing down his chin now, dripping onto his shirt.

"Do you ever wonder?" he asked, his voice strained but steady. "Do you ever lie awake at night—well, awake in the mornings, since you clearly don't sleep through nights anymore because of me—and ask yourself why? Why you survived that second time? Why did I let you live when I was so very, very keen on killing you for your impertinence? For daring to walk through my memories uninvited?"

"I don't care why."

"Liar." He coughed, and more blood came. "You care. You care desperately. It's written all over your face. The question haunts you. Eats at you. Because you know, don't you? You know that I could have snuffed you out like a candle. I could have crushed your mind like an eggshell. And yet here you are. Healthy. Whole. Getting stronger by the day."

Use arrow keys (or A / D) to PREV/NEXT chapter

Chapter 112: Memory 4

BONNIE

He squirmed against the wall, searching for any angle that didn't set his ribs grinding like broken glass. I held my ground. I had to. If I eased up for even a heartbeat, the fragile edge I'd carved out would vanish, and I couldn't let that happen. Not with him. Not with whatever he truly was.

"I came here in my true form," he continued, his eyes never leaving mine. "Not a disguise or a projection. This is the real me, or as close to it as I can manage in this limited medium. And you must have noticed. You must be wondering. Why do we look so similar, little dream walker? Why do you have my hair? My eyes? My lack of pigment?"

"We look nothing alike." The words came out too fast, too defensive. I hated myself for saying them, for proving him right. "You're delusional. You took this form because you're trying to mess with my head, and I refuse to let you."

"Do you?" He tilted his head, considering. "Do you really refuse? Or are you just saying that because admitting the truth would break something inside you that you've spent your whole life trying to keep intact?"

I opened my mouth to answer, to scream, to hurl every denial I had at him, but the pressure I'd been holding snapped. Only for a second. Just the smallest slackening in my shoulders, a fleeting release of the mental grip I'd locked around him.

And that was all it took.

He dropped to the floor, landing in a crouch so fluid it seemed rehearsed, almost graceful. His hand flicked out, palm up, and something invisible crashed into my chest—not flesh, not quite, but real enough to hurl me backward. My focus splintered. The power I'd gathered scattered like a flock of startled birds.

I clawed for my power, desperate to rebuild the wall between us, but he was already in motion. Already upright. Already stalking toward me, that smile carved into his face, blood streaking his chin, not a flicker of pain in his step.

"You have excellent control," he admitted, circling me like a shark. "For an amateur and someone who only just learned she had power worth respecting. But you're not strong enough yet. Not experienced enough. Not angry enough."

He raised his own hand, and I felt the pressure build again, but this time it was against me. Invisible hands wrapped around my torso, lifting me off my feet, carrying me backward until my spine connected with the opposite wall. The impact drove the air from my lungs. Stars burst behind my eyes.

"I, on the other hand," he continued, closing the distance between us with slow, deliberate steps, "have had centuries to practice. Centuries to refine my technique. To learn exactly how much pressure a ribcage can take before it cracks. How much force a skull can withstand before it caves. Would you like to know the exact measurements?"

I fought against his grip, forcing my power outward to meet his, but it was like trying to hold back a tidal wave with a paper fan. He was stronger. Overwhelmingly stronger. The space between us wasn't a gap; it was an abyss.

He halted just inches from me, close enough that his scent filled my senses. Blood, yes, but layered with something cold. Like iron chilled by winter. Like snow steeped in pine, smoke, and the memory of old violence.

"When I smelled your blood," he whispered, his breath hot against my ear despite the cold rolling off his skin, "that second night. When I cut into you on the edge of my dreams and the scent hit me like a physical blow. Do you know what I thought?"

I turned my head away. He caught my chin with his free hand, forcing me to look at him. His fingers were ice against my jaw.

"I thought, 'Impossible.' I thought, 'This is a trick. This is some powerful glamour, some illusion meant to distract me.'" He laughed again, softer this time. Almost fond. "But it

wasn't. It was real. Your blood sang to me. It recognized me. And I found that I could not follow through with my original intention. I could not kill you. Not when you smelled like family. Not when you smelled like mine."

"You're lying." The words came out choked, barely audible.

"Am I?" His thumb traced my cheekbone, a parody of tenderness. "Blood is thicker than water, do you not think so... daughter?"

The world tilted.

Daughter?!? *oem*

He'd said it. The word I'd been dodging since I first saw his face. Since I caught the echo in his hair. Since that awful, inescapable recognition twisted in my gut, where instinct ruled and logic dared not go.

"No." I shook my head, or tried to, but his grip held me still. "No, that's not possible. My mother would never—she wasn't—she wouldn't have—"

"She wouldn't have what?" He interrupted, his voice gentle now, coaxing, the way people spoke to frightened animals. "Wouldn't have lain with a man you deem a monster? Wouldn't have opened her legs for a creature like me? A man who, before this, wanted to end your life?"

His eyes searched mine, looking for something. Confirmation, maybe. Or denial. I couldn't tell which he wanted more.

"You're not supposed to exist," he murmured, almost to himself. "I am not supposed to have a child. The curse saw to that. Her curse locked my seed in stone, made me barren as winter earth. So I do wonder. What exactly is her goal? What game is she playing, allowing a child of my blood to actually walk the earth before I bend the knee?"

I shuddered. The words were too familiar. They echoed what the goddess had said when she possessed Fia, her voice breaking as she tried to explain why my existence was forbidden.

But this man, this monster, couldn't be him. He couldn't be the one my mother loved, even for a moment. The one who gave me half my blood, half my soul. He was a killer. A psychopath who tried to erase me just for trespassing in a dream he claimed as his own. He wasn't a father. He was a nightmare dressed in human skin.

"You're lying," I repeated, finding my voice again, finding the anger that had carried me this far. "You're trying to get inside my head. You're trying to make me doubt myself, doubt my mother, doubt everything. And I refuse. I refuse to let you do this."

Use arrow keys (or A / D) to PREV/NEXT chapter

Chapter 113: Lycaon the good

BONNIE

Once more, I reached for the power within me. This time it crawled, sluggish and bruised by the clash, but it answered. I drew it tight in my chest, forging it into a weapon.

He felt it. His eyes widened, just slightly, just enough to tell me I'd surprised him.

"Fascinating," he observed as he stepped back, released my chin, and lowered his hand.

The invisible force pinning me to the wall vanished. I crashed to my feet, knees threatening to give but refusing to surrender. The gift of small miracles surged around me, now visible, crackling in the air like the static before a storm.

I hurled it at him with everything I had, but he brushed it aside as if batting away a fly. The unleashed power crashed into the yellowed wall, making the whole room shudder to its bones.

"You're fighting back," he noted. "Good. That's better than I expected. Perhaps you got that from me. Your mother never had that fire. She was all softness... and gentleness... and that disgusting desire to help everyone regardless of whether they deserved it."

"Don't talk about her." The words came out as a snarl. "You don't get to talk about my mother. You don't know anything about her."

"I know she died in pain," he replied casually. "I know she tried to protect you. I was in your head. Remember?" He spread his hands. "She failed you, daughter."

Rage blinded me, and I lunged.

The red followed, coiling around my fist like a gauntlet of living light. I aimed for his smirk, ready to erase it forever, but he snatched my wrist mid-swing. His grip locked around my bones, and for a heartbeat we stood, two storms colliding, impossible energy crackling between us.

He was stronger. I could feel it in his effortless grip, the way he didn't even flinch. Yet beneath that strength, I sensed hesitation. He wasn't fighting back. He could have crushed my wrist, ended this in a heartbeat, but he didn't.

To my surprise, he released my wrist, stepping back again, raising his hands in surrender. "I want to show you something. Something that might help you understand. That might help us both understand why the universe has decided to play this particular joke on us."

"I don't want to see anything you have to show me."

"Yes, you do." He smiled, but it was different now. Less predatory. More tired. More old. "You want to see her. Don't you? You want to remember what she looked like. What she sounded like. What she smelled like. You were so young when she died. The trauma stole your memories. But I can give them back. I can show you."

My breath snagged in my throat. Why was I even tempted? The red light in my hands wavered, flickering and uncertain.

"I took her form once, remember?" he continued. "The first time you invaded my dreamscape. I got in your head, and I tried to appear as your mother, to comfort you, to guide you. But you didn't recognize her anymore. You didn't remember her face well enough to allow me to make it. Will this jog your memory, perhaps?"

He reached out, faster than I could react, and touched two fingers to my forehead.

The room dissolved.

The yellowed walls dripped away like melting wax. The bed, the sink, the mirror—all of it blurred into nameless colors, then reshaped into something new. Something vast. Something open.

Grass. Tall blades, green and gold, swaying in a wind scented with honeysuckle and far-off rain. A meadow. The sky above was impossibly blue, the sort of blue that belonged only to memories or paintings. The sun hung low, drenching everything in honeyed light.

I stood at the heart of it, turning slowly, my heart pounding against my ribs. He lingered nearby, watching with an unreadable gaze.

"Where are we?" I demanded.

"A memory," he answered. "One of mine. One of the few I still cherish. Look behind you."

I resisted. Every instinct screamed to keep my gaze locked on the predator. But something deeper tugged at me, something stronger than fear.

I turned.

They ran through the grass, chasing and laughing, playing like children though they were grown. The man's hair was dark and thick, nothing like the white that crowned the monster now. He was broad-shouldered, face lifted to the sun, radiating happiness. He looked human.

And the woman—

I stopped breathing.

She was beautiful—not like a goddess or a movie star, but in a way that made my chest ache. Her dark hair matched his, pulled back in a messy braid. Kindness shaped every line of her face. She wore a simple blue cotton dress, barefoot, her feet tossing up grass as she fled from the man chasing her.

Her laughter rang out, light and musical, carrying across the meadow, brimming with joy.

I knew that laugh. I'd heard it in dreams that vanished with the dawn, in lullabies whispered in the dark, in the memory of arms that once made the world safe and me loved.

"Mom," I whispered.

The word barely escaped my lips. My vision blurred. I blinked, and tears traced hot paths down my cheeks. I was crying, and I couldn't stop.

She turned—the woman who gave me life, who cradled me as a baby, who died to shield me from monsters. She looked straight at me, though she couldn't see me, couldn't know I watched from across the gulf of time and death and memory. She smiled, the same smile I'd glimpsed in my own reflection when happiness slipped past my defenses, and I felt safe.

She looked like me. Or maybe I looked like her. The same eyes, the same curve to the mouth, the same tilt of the head, as if she was listening to a secret only she could hear.

Behind her, the dark-haired man caught up, sweeping her into his arms and spinning her in a dizzy circle. She shrieked with laughter, playfully pounding his shoulders. He set her down with care, turned her in his embrace, and kissed her with such tenderness I had to look away, feeling like an intruder on something sacred.

"She loved him," the monster said from beside me. His voice was soft now, stripped of its earlier cruelty. "She loved him despite what he was. Despite what he'd done. She saw something in him that no one else had ever seen. Something worth saving."

I scrubbed at my eyes, but the tears kept flowing, hot and unstoppable, until the meadow blurred into a watercolor—beautiful, but slipping out of focus.

"That man," I choked out. "That is you?"

I had to confirm.

"Yes. It is me."

Use arrow keys (or A / D) to PREV/NEXT chapter

Chapter 114: Is it love?

BONNIE

I stared at the meadow until the edges blurred. My mother laughed again, that sound I'd spent years trying to remember, and the man with dark hair spun her again, both of them breathless and bright with joy. The sun hit them at an angle that turned everything gold, and I hated how beautiful it looked. I hated that he had this memory and I didn't.

"You cannot be good." I turned away from the vision. My voice scraped out rough and uneven. "You tried to kill me before you knew who I was. You would have if I wasn't..."

I couldn't say it. The word stuck in my throat like a bone.

"If you were not my daughter?" He finished for me. He stood with his hands loose at his sides, no longer smiling, no longer bleeding. The wind from the meadow memory stirred his white hair, though the grass didn't touch his boots. "Most likely, yes. I am not an altruistic person. I can be honest about that."

"Then why should I believe anything you say?"

"Because I have no reason to lie to you." He stepped closer. The meadow flickered, losing cohesion, and the yellowed walls of my Omega quarters started bleeding through at the edges. "I have been locked like an animal in a cage, unable to stimulate my mind as I would like because of the fear of people. Do you know who locked me?"

I shook my head, but I had a suspicion. The way he said it, weighted and careful, made my stomach clench.

"The man who currently claims you as his mate. He and his ancestors before him."

I laughed. The sound came out sharp and broken, bouncing off the walls that were solidifying around us again. "With no reason? I find that hard to believe, sorry. The goddess said you were as evil as they come and you are the reason for the suffering of many."

"I see she has gotten to you already. But me... as evil as they come?" He tilted his head. "The idea that I was the reason for the suffering of many?"

"It is not a ridiculous thought."

"Do you actually know who she is? Who I am? Who you are?"

"I assume you're going to tell me."

He nodded slowly. "She's my mother."

The word landed strangely, and I stared at him. "What?"

"It's true," he said. "I have no reason to lie to you about this. I'm a demigod. You might already know the name. The demigod Lycaon." He watched my face carefully as he said it. "Which would make you a quarter god yourself."

Something clicked into place then, cold and sudden, and I thought of Alpha King Cornelius, dying in that library, whispering about night children. About Lycans.

Was this it? Was this what he'd been trying to warn Lysander about with his last breath.

"She was the one who cursed you," I said. "In that memory. Selene."

"I showed you that memory," he said. "I'm not entirely sure why you tore yourself out of it before it finished. I wanted our introduction to go better than that."

I shook my head, the whole thing pressing down on me at once, too heavy, too fast. "I want nothing to do with you."

"That isn't true," he said. "What exactly did my mother say to you?"

"I don't care what she said," I said. "She practically called you a hellspawn." I crossed my arms over my chest. My hands were shaking, so I hid them against my ribs. "No mother would call her child that without reason."

He laughed then, a real sound, warm and startled. "That would be the first order of business. My mother loved my father. It is why the werewolf race exists today. But I do not think she really loved her children. So yes, she would."

"I don't believe you one bit."

"Then do you really believe your mother was involved with a monster with no scruples?" He gestured toward the fading meadow, where the ghost of my mother still smiled at a man who looked nothing like the creature standing before me. "She spoke nothing but life about us. I saw it in your head... She protected you. She died for you. So tell me, daughter, why would she lie down with evil? Why would she love it?"

I turned back to the memory. The woman there had my eyes. She had my chin. She looked at that man like he hung the moon, and I felt tears burning again, hot and humiliating. "I don't know. I don't know anything anymore."

"She saw something in me," he said. His voice dropped, stripped of its theatrical cruelty. "Something worth saving. Just as you might, if you allowed yourself."

I wiped my face with my sleeve. The fabric came away damp. "Why did you abandon us then?"

He went still. The silence stretched between us, filled with the drip of the faucet I'd manifested, the hum of the light fixture, the sound of my own heartbeat thudding in my ears.

"Because of you." He said it flat, no inflection, like he was stating the weather. "When your mother became pregnant, I lashed out. Because I knew it was not possible. My mother had made it impossible. The curse locked my seed in stone, made me barren as winter earth. So when your mother told me she was going to have a child, I knew my mother was playing games. I knew she wanted to royally play in our faces, to dangle something I could never have and then snatch it away as she always did. And I wanted retribution."

He started pacing, three steps to the wall, three steps back. His boots didn't make noise on the tile, which felt wrong. Everything about him felt wrong, half-real, half-myth.

"I attacked this very place," he continued. "Intending to kill the Alpha King and destabilize the people she chose and loved over me. The ones who had me cursed, who kept me locked in darkness for decades. I thought if I could not have you, if I could not understand why the universe had decided to mock me with a child I should not be able to conceive, then I would make them pay for it. Then I got sealed again. For over two decades for it. I have been awake all those years in my own head."

I pressed my back against the wall. The tile was cold through my shirt. "You're saying you attacked because of me? That's supposed to make me feel what, exactly? Guilty? Sympathetic?"

"I am saying I am not the only monster in this story." He stopped pacing and faced me. His eyes were gray, the color of storm clouds over water, and they held mine without blinking. "I am saying that your existence broke something fundamental about the world I understood. And rather than rejoice, rather than accept the miracle, I chose violence. I chose destruction. I am not proud of that, though I suspect you will not believe me."

"Why would I? You tried to gut me in my sleep."

"And now I am standing here, talking to you, allowing you to pin me to walls and threaten me, because I cannot bring myself to hurt you." He spread his hands again, palms up, empty. "Does that sound like the behavior of a man with no scruples? A man who cares for nothing?"

"It sounds like manipulation." I pushed off the wall. My legs felt steadier now, anger returning like a tide. "You're trying to get inside my head. You're trying to make me doubt myself, doubt my mother, doubt everything. And I refuse. I refuse to let you do this."

I shook my head. The motion made me dizzy, but I kept doing it, denying the words, denying the pull of his voice. "I want nothing to do with you. I don't care about any of this goddess and demigod nonsense. I am not a pawn in your family drama. I am not a piece to be moved around so you can get revenge on your mother."

"That is not true." He moved closer, and I backed up until my shoulder blades hit the wall again. "You care very much what my mother said to you. You care that she abandoned you to see if you would break. You care that she watched your mother die and did nothing. You care that she broke divine law just to tell you to embrace your power, but she would not break it to save the woman who raised you."

"How do you know all that... Stop it."

"She used you. Just as she used me. Just as she uses everyone who comes into contact with her." His voice rose, not shouting, but filling the small room until it seemed to come from everywhere at once. "So tell me, daughter, what exactly did my mother say to you? Did she tell you that you were special? That you were chosen? Did she tell you that you had a great destiny?"

Use arrow keys (or A / D) to PREV/NEXT chapter

Chapter 115: The Monster's Daughter

BONNIE

"No. She said I was a mistake." The words tore out of me before I could stop them. "She said I wasn't supposed to exist. She said she wanted to see if I would become like you. If I would break the way you broke."

He went quiet. The silence was worse than his words. He looked at me with something that might have been pity, or might have been recognition, or might have been the satisfaction of a predator who finally cornered his prey.

"And have you?" he asked softly. "Have you broken?"

"I don't know." I looked down at my hands. They were still shaking, but now the red was flickering at my fingertips, the power responding to my distress, my confusion, my fear. "I don't know what I am anymore. I thought I was a werewolf. An Omega with not much going on. Then I discovered I was a healer. And it has always just shined as the fact that I was just a girl with cursed magic. But now... I'm hearing you say I am not. That I'm something else. Something wrong."

"There is nothing wrong with you." He said it with such certainty that I looked up. "You are exactly what you need to be. You are the loophole in the curse. You are the thing my

mother did not plan for. And that makes you powerful beyond measure. I am sure that scares her, which is why she tried to demonize me to you."

I did not tell him what Selene had fully said. That she got a loophole for me to exist. I could not trust him. Even if this showdown had gone down differently than I thought, I could not trust him.

"I don't want to be powerful." I pushed past him, walking to the center of the room, needing space, needing air that didn't taste like him. "I came and called you into this space for one reason and one reason alone. I want to be left alone. I want to sleep without bleeding. I am not interested in being anyone's experiment. I just want to be Bonnie."

"Bonnie." He tried the name out, rolling it on his tongue. "That is a beautiful name; your mother named you that, I assume?"

I gave him no reply.

"It does hurt that you are cold to me. It is not my fault that I was already sealed when you were born. I never got to hold you. I never got to see if you had my eyes or her smile. I have been robbed of everything, daughter. Including you."

"Don't call me that." I whipped around. The red flared brighter, casting strange shadows on the yellowed walls. "You don't get to call me that. You don't get to claim fatherhood after trying to murder me. You don't get to be sentimental about missed birthdays when you were going to gut me like a fish. I pray this is a cruel trick. I pray you are not him."

"Give me some grace. I was confused. I was angry. I had been trapped in darkness for almost twenty years, if not more, and suddenly there was this girl walking through my memories, seeing my secrets, touching my past." He ran a hand through his white hair, the gesture so human it made my chest ache. "I reacted badly. I admit that. But can you honestly say you would have done differently? If you were trapped, forgotten, sealed away like a dirty secret, and someone invaded your mind?"

"I wouldn't have tried to kill them."

"You killed a Beta. You killed sentinels. I saw it in your head." He lowered his hand. His eyes caught the red light and held it, reflecting it back at me. "You are not innocent, daughter. But you're not what you think you are. You did what you had to do, and it is sad that you hated yourself for it afterward." His voice softened. "That is what separates you from me. Not the killing. The guilt."

The words landed like stones in still water. I thought of the cell, the way the red had consumed them, the way I'd felt nothing but relief and terror in equal measure. I thought of my mother's body, cooling on the floor, and how I'd caused that too.

"I came here to warn you." My voice sounded small. I hated it. I straightened my spine and tried again, stronger. "I came here to tell you to stop hunting me in my sleep. That is all. I want nothing to do with you. I don't care about your curse, your mother, or your tragic backstory. I am not your daughter. I am not your family. I am nothing to you, and you are nothing to me."

He watched me for a long moment. The red light pulsed between us, a barrier and a bridge.

"You can ask him," he said finally.

"Ask who what?"

"Your mate. Lysander. Ask him about me. Ask him about the sealing. Ask him how many generations of his family know about me and have kept me locked in that prison," He smiled, and it was sharp as broken glass. "Ask him if he knows that you are mine. That you carry my blood. That when you hit the right age, the curse will consume you just as it consumed me."

I froze. The red flickered, dimmed, almost went out. "What?"

"The curse is in the blood. It is in the magic. You are Lycan now, not merely a werewolf. Not entirely." He took a step toward me, and this time I didn't back away. I couldn't. "You might not be as trusting of me now, but the way that boy will look at you when he realizes what you are? When he realizes that his mate, who he is supposed to love more than anything in the world, is the daughter of the monster his family has kept chained? He will see you in a whole different light, and you will be so sick. You will see the truth of what I am telling you."

"You're lying." But my voice wavered. I thought of Lysander, of the way he looked at me all the time, like I was precious.

He was not like any of them. He would never. He would never.

"I would not recommend telling him about your parentage, though." He was close enough now that I could smell him again, that cold iron scent, that pine and smoke. "You will be surprised how quickly people switch up on you. How fast love turns to fear. How fast protection becomes imprisonment."

"I don't believe you." But I did. Some part of me did, which I was now fighting tooth and nail against. I didn't believe it. Because it was not new.

"Then believe this." He reached out and touched my forehead again, too fast for me to stop him, too gentle for me to flinch away from. "I am done hunting you in your dreams. You have proven you can fight back. You have proven you are worth the effort of knowing. But the next time we meet, it will be because you sought me out. Because you need

answers I can provide. Because you finally realize that I am the only one who understands you and that I am your father."

I gasped and shoved him away. The vision broke. The room dissolved around us, the yellowed walls melting into gray static.

"I will never seek you out." I backed away, feeling the dream fraying at the edges, feeling myself being pulled back toward waking. "I will never need you. I have people who love me. I have someone who is just like me. I have Lysander. I have... I have a pack."

"For now," he agreed. He was fading too, becoming translucent around the edges, that predatory smile still fixed on his face. "But remember this, daughter. I am the only one who cannot lie to you about what you are. I will be waiting."

"Go to hell."

"I have been there. It looks remarkably like a sealed cell." He laughed, and the sound followed me as the dream collapsed, as the gray became white.

I woke up gasping, sunlight streaming through the window of Lysander's mother's room, Fia's face hovering above me, pale with worry.

Chapter 116: High horse

BRADLEY

I saw them from the far end of the corridor. Queen Edelina, moving with more energy than she'd shown since her supposed illness sent her packed to that shack of an infirmary weeks ago, and beside her, an Omega I didn't recognize, dark hair, striking eyes, walking with the particular stillness of someone who'd been taught to carry herself well. Both of them were heading toward Prince Johann's chambers.

Something about the pairing set my teeth on edge before I'd even fully processed why.

I signaled the nearest sentinel and sent him to shadow them.

It bothered me more than I wanted to admit that the last spy I'd assigned to Edelina, the one who'd tailed her all the way to that grimy little human club she'd disappeared into not even a day ago, hadn't reported back since. Not a single word. Not so much as a garbled message confirming he'd made it out with his skin intact. Then Edelina had simply reappeared at the estate, composed and smiling, offering up a DNA test for her son without a shred of resistance, and dropping the not-so-subtle implication that our late King had lied to me directly about the boy's parentage.

That didn't sit right with me. Cornelius had been many things over the decades I'd served him. A calculating man. A cold one, at times. But he wasn't the type to lie unless it served some purpose greater than his own comfort. I'd trusted that about him for longer than I'd trusted almost anyone else alive.

I found the healer who'd drawn Johann's blood that morning waiting near the east corridor, and I fell into step beside her.

"How long until the DNA test yields results," I asked.

"With our current equipment," she said, "before nightfall, High Beta."

"I want a sample of that blood for myself as well," I said. "Separate from whatever goes into the official process."

"As formerly instructed," she said, "I drew more than what was strictly necessary. If you follow me to the infirmary, I can provide you with the remainder now."

We hadn't gone more than a few steps before the sentinel I'd sent after Edelina and the Omega came jogging back toward me, breathless.

"I heard nothing," he said. "I saw nothing either, High Beta. The room went dead silent almost the moment they entered it. Like they weren't speaking at all."

I nearly laughed at that.

I'd planted a small listening device in the Prince's chambers earlier, while his attention had been elsewhere, entirely occupied with feigning offense over rumors he'd clearly already known were coming. Given everything piling up around this family now, I no longer felt even a flicker of guilt about eavesdropping on royal blood.

I pulled the small receiver from my coat and fitted the earpiece into place, expecting at worst some muffled conversation, some scrap of useful information.

Instead, a shrill burst of static tore straight through my skull, sharp enough that I ripped the earpiece free and very nearly dropped it onto the stone floor entirely. My ear rang for several seconds afterward, a high, thin whine that refused to fade.

Strange. Had the device been discovered and destroyed deliberately, or had it simply malfunctioned at the single worst possible moment? Neither answer sat comfortably with me.

The healer noticed the look on my face and paused mid-step. "Are we still headed to the infirmary, High Beta?"

I nodded, tucking the ruined receiver away. One way or another, I intended to walk away from this day holding something concrete in my hands, even if it had to come from a source considerably less convenient than eavesdropping on a prince.

We continued through the corridors together, and she handed me the small vial once we reached her station, the dark red liquid sealed tight behind glass. I slipped it into my coat pocket and pulled out my phone, dialing one of the sentinels I'd sent out as soon as the delicate incident occur.

"Any progress with the witches on the list I gave you," I said.

"We split into two groups," he said, "to cover more ground faster. Whichever team finds a good healing witch first reports back immediately."

"Smart thinking," I said.

"My group's trail led us into human territory," he continued. "We believe the witch, Madeline—"

"Valentine Blossom's daughter," I chimed in.

"Yes. Well, she has been taking a self-imposed sabbatical out here for some time now. Deliberately staying off anyone's radar, from what the sources tell us."

"Keep me informed," I said. "The moment you have eyes on her."

"We're about to approach the house now, High Beta."

"Do not antagonize her," I said, my voice sharpening. "I've heard she has a particular perchance for popping heads clean off shoulders when she's sufficiently annoyed, and by all accounts she's frighteningly skilled at it. Approach carefully and most especially, respectfully."

"Understood."

I ended the call and continued deeper into the infirmary, passing through a corridor where several Omegas knelt scrubbing the last remnants of dried blood from the walls and floor, their expressions carefully blank in the way people trained themselves to look when they wanted to survive proximity to violence without drawing attention. The bodies of the sentinels who'd died defending that hallway were already gone, cleared away hours ago for whatever rites the crown would eventually see fit to grant them.

I intended to see them properly avenged before this was finished. Whatever it cost me.

I made my way further into the ward until I reached the private room where the Delicate rested, and I paused a moment at the door, considering.

Lysander would disapprove of how quickly I was moving on all of this, pushing forward on instinct rather than solid evidence and not caring much about what happened to that poor delicate. But it felt, with every passing hour, like whoever stood against this crown remained one full step ahead of us regardless of how carefully we planned our next move. I needed something. Anything at all to work with.

I pushed the door open and stepped inside.

She lay in the bed, shifting slightly at the sound of my boots against the floor, both eyes wrapped tightly in bandages already soaked through with dried, rust-colored blood that had seeped out from whatever remained beneath the fabric.

"Who's there?" The delicate said, her voice thin.

"High Beta Bradley."

"Oh... I was told a witch would be found for me," she said. "One skilled specifically in healing magic. Are they... Are they here?"

"My people are still searching," I said. "But I need something from you first, before that arrives."

I pulled the vial from my coat pocket.

"With what, exactly," she said, tilting her bandaged face toward the sound of glass shifting in my hand.

"Can you read blood effectively the way you read memory from objects and bodies," I asked.

She went very still.

"Does this have anything to do with what happened to the girl who was hanged," she said quietly.

"No," I said. "It doesn't."

"I have a feeling you're lying to me."

I opened my mouth to insist otherwise, some practiced denial already forming, then thought better of it entirely. Honesty seemed the wiser path here, given everything I'd already asked of her, everything it had already cost her.

"Alright," I said. "Yes. I lied. But this kingdom genuinely needs your help right now, more than I can properly explain."

"When I touched that girl," she retorted, her voice fraying at the edges, "what came back to me was pure darkness. But that wasn't what did this to my eyes." She lifted one bandaged hand slightly, gesturing toward her ruined face. "It felt like something didn't want me looking any further. Like I'd trespassed somewhere I had no right to be. I want to help you, High Beta. I truly do. But I can't get past what happened to me, or what might happen if I try it again without something protecting me this time. I don't want to die. Not like this. Not blind and alone in some infirmary bed."

I slid the vial back into my coat pocket slowly.

"And if we secure a talented witch," I said, "one skilled enough to stand guard over you while you work, shielding you from whatever struck you last time? Would that change your answer?"

She was quiet for a long moment, weighing it, her fingers plucking absently at the edge of the blanket covering her lap.

"I might," she said finally. "I might consider it, under those conditions."

"That's good enough for me," I told her.

Use arrow keys (or A / D) to PREV/NEXT chapter

Chapter 117: It's in your blood 1

JOHANN

The moment Willow left, my mother turned to me with the particular look she used to wear when I was small and about to be given a task she had already decided I would not refuse.

"It's time for your first move," she said.

"And what would that be?"

"There are retainers currently jailed," she said, settling herself into the chair beside my window. "The men who were supposed to protect your father when it happened and the ones who let that fraud healer in as a retainer because of their sheer incompetence. A little bird tells me Lysander has no intention of having them hanged."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning your father was loved by a great many people in this kingdom," she said. "And those people are going to still want someone to blame."

"They already have someone to blame. The girl and the rogue that disappeared."

"Do they?" Her mouth curved faintly. "Since the girl that was supposed to take it all is now a healer, the brunt of those sins now fall on those retainers. The rogue who actually did it is dead or rather the safe thing to say is that he eloped. Those two cannot be dragged into a square and made to answer for what they did. What the people have instead are the men and women who are left.."

"But.... they weren't responsible for his death."

"No," she agreed, far too easily. "But they were responsible for protecting him."

I stared at her.

She crossed one leg over the other, smoothing an invisible crease from her skirt and I nearly knew where she was headed. "There is a difference between being guilty and being useful."

"That sounds like something you've rehearsed."

"I have had years to learn that grief makes people impatient for justice, and impatience rarely cares whether justice is deserved." She leaned back in the chair. "Your father's death has left a wound in this kingdom. People will want to see blood poured into it. If Lysander refuses to give them that, they will begin asking why."

"Because he knows they didn't kill him. Neither were they the reason for what happened."

"Does that matter?"

The question was soft, almost curious, but I knew that tone. It was the same one she had used when I was a child and had pointed out some obvious flaw in an instruction she had given me, only to discover that the flaw had never mattered to her.

"They were present," she continued. "They failed to protect the king. They allowed whoever came for him to reach him just as they allowed that healer into their circle. Whether they intended his death is beside the point. To the people who loved your father, their failure will look like betrayal."

"And you think I should encourage that."

"I think you should understand what it gives you."

I said nothing.

My mother's gaze settled on me, calm and unwavering.

"If Lysander keeps them imprisoned, he owns the decision. If you call for their punishment, you become the son demanding justice for his murdered father. Those are two very different positions for a man who intends to rule."

"That would be treason," I said. "Executing prisoners the sitting regent has already decided to spare."

"I've looked into the law," she said, waving a hand like the concern was beneath her. "As the King's son, you retain certain rights regardless of who currently occupies the throne. One of those rights is the sole authority to punish those responsible for harm done to your father. It's an old provision. Rarely used. But it still stands."

"Stop being weak about this, Johann," she said, sharper now. "This is the first step. Divide the court. Show them Lysander is soft where it counts, unwilling to give the people what they actually want. If it comes to war for that throne eventually, you need cracks already showing in his foundation."

She coughed then, hard, doubling forward slightly, and when she straightened, a thin line of blood traced down from the corner of her mouth before she wiped it away with the back of her hand.

Something in my chest tightened at the sight of it. A reminder of exactly what waited for me too, given enough time.

"Of course," I said. "I'll do it."

"Good boy," she said, some of the sharpness melting out of her voice, replaced by something warmer, more familiar. "Make me proud."

I dressed in my royal regalia, the deep blue jacket, the gold pin catching the morning light, and stepped out into the corridor with my spine straight and my expression set into something I hoped read as righteous rather than desperate.

I made my way down to the cells, my boots striking hard against the stone, and called for the sentinels stationed there the moment I arrived.

They straightened at the sight of me, wary, exchanging glances before one finally spoke.

"Prince Johann. What brings you down here?"

"I want the retainers jailed for my father's death rounded up," I said. "For hanging. Today."

The sentinel's expression shifted immediately, uncertain. "My Prince, the current regent hasn't authorized—"

"I'm not asking for his authorization," I said, cutting him off cleanly. "As the King's son, I retain the sole right to punish those responsible for harm done to my father. That right predates Lysander's regency and supersedes it in this specific matter. Check the old statutes yourself if you doubt me."

Another sentinel shifted uneasily. "We'd need to confirm that with someone higher up."

"Then go get my cousin," I said, spreading my hands. "Let's see if he can actually dispel what I'm telling you. I'm certain he'd love the opportunity to publicly contradict established law in front of witnesses, especially so soon after inheriting a throne everyone already whispers he barely deserves."

Silence followed that, several of them exchanging glances again, weighing exactly how much trouble either choice might bring down on their heads.

"So," I said, letting my voice harden. "Unless you actually want to be the ones who broke centuries-old law by refusing a legitimate royal order, I'd suggest you get to work."

One of the older sentinels muttered something low to the man beside him, something I caught only the tail end of. "He isn't wrong about the statute."

That seemed to settle it. Reluctantly, one of them moved toward the wall where the keys hung, lifting the heavy iron ring free with hands that weren't entirely steady.

"Bring them out," I said. "All of them."

I stood there in the dim corridor, watching the cell doors creak open one by one, watching frightened, exhausted men and women shuffle forward under the weight of chains they'd been wearing since the night my father died, and I felt something cold and satisfied settle into my chest.

My mother would be pleased.

Chapter 118: It's in your blood 2

LYSANDER

I paced the hall, unable to hold a single thought together, my mind circling Bonnie and whatever was happening in that room right now. I knew Fia was with her. I also knew Fia had plenty more knowledge about this than anyone alive. That should have been enough to steady me, but every minute that passed without word seemed to make the knot in my chest tighten further.

Delta caught my eye from where she stood near the door.

"She's in safe hands, Alpha Lysander."

"I'm sure," I said, though I didn't sound sure at all, even to myself.

I could still remember the terrified look on Bonnie's face when she had been attacked. I could not forget it. But what child I do now than wait and let her and Fia talk?

Fia was better equipped to help her, because whatever was happening required someone who understood it, someone who had answers I did not. Those were reasonable explanations. They did nothing to quiet the part of me that wanted to be in that room, watching Bonnie breathe, making certain she was still herself and was most of all comfortable around Fia.

Knowing Fia though, they would click just fine.

"Watch her from here," I said. "And should your help be needed, help her, or call for me if anything happens. Anything at all."

Delta nodded.

I left before she could answer, my feet carrying me toward my uncle's study out of pure habit. I had no real reason to go there, except that my mind kept returning to the torn-out page. It had lodged itself somewhere behind my thoughts, refusing to be displaced by anything more urgent.

By the time I reached the study, I was irritated with myself for caring about it instead of what mattered the most.

Bonnie.

But I could not dislodge that this 'god' had something to do with it.

I opened the book again once I reached the desk, staring at the jagged remnants of paper still clinging to the spine. Someone had not merely removed the page. They had torn it out with enough force to leave ragged edges behind, as though they had been in a hurry to make certain no one ever read what was written there.

Why?

What had it said?

I ran my thumb carefully along the damaged edge, wondering whether it was actually my uncle that had removed it himself or whether someone else had decided that whatever had been written on that page was too dangerous to remain in the book.

My gaze drifted toward the spelled wall across the room.

Beyond it was the vault.

And inside the vault was the creature I had been trying to understand, a creature that had been sealed away for reasons no one seemed willing to explain properly. I had already wondered whether the torn page had something to do with him. Now, standing alone in my uncle's study with the book open beneath my hands, the possibility felt less like speculation and more like another piece of a puzzle I had no idea how to solve.

There was little use in wondering what a sealed, silent creature might have told me if he could actually speak.

But perhaps a delicate would know. But with exploding eyeballs, was this a risk she would ever take again?

I was still deep in thought when a sharp series of raps hit the study door before I could sink further into that spiral in my mind.

I crossed the room and pulled it open.

A sentinel stood there, breathing hard.

"Your Majesty... The Prince... He's about to execute the detained retainers. The ones held for incompetence in the late King's murder."

For a moment, I simply stared at him.

"What the fuck?"

The sentinel straightened.

I was already moving past him.

"Take me there immediately."

He fell into step beside me as we hurried through the halls. The news settled into my mind piece by piece, each part making less sense than the last.

The retainers.

The men who had been arrested after my uncle's murder.

The men I had explicitly ordered to be kept alive after Bonnie's begging and guilt because death was not the way to go.

And my cousin was about to execute them. Of course he was.

I pointed at the first sentinel we passed.

"You... Come with me."

Another appeared at the end of the corridor.

"You... Come with me."

Then another.

By the time we reached the stairwell leading toward the courtyard, I had six sentinels falling in behind me. Their boots struck the stone in quick succession as we descended.

"In what world can he do that?" I demanded.

The sentinel who had first alerted me glanced at me before answering.

"I believe the Prince knows he's acting against your wishes, Your Majesty."

"That wasn't my question."

"No, Your Majesty."

We turned sharply into another corridor.

"But according to the law," he continued carefully, "he may have the authority to do so."

I stopped so abruptly that the sentinels behind me nearly collided.

"May?"

The man swallowed.

"The Crown's succession laws distinguish between the authority of the Regent and the prerogatives of the Royal House. Your authority as Regent extends over the administration of the kingdom, the courts, the military, and the affairs of the Crown. But the Prince retains certain rights by virtue of his position as the late King's son and heir."

"He is not King."

"No, Your Majesty."

"I am Regent."

"Yes."

"Then explain to me why he thinks he can execute men under my protection without so much as informing me."

The sentinel's expression tightened.

"Because they are not legally considered under your protection."

My jaw clenched.

"They were arrested by my order."

"They were."

"And I ordered that they be kept alive."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Then how does that give him the right to kill them?"

The sentinel drew a careful breath.

"Because their arrest was made in connection with the late King's murder."

I stared at him.

He continued, choosing each word as though he knew precisely how dangerous the conversation had become.

"Under the laws concerning crimes against the sovereign, punishment for those accused of murdering, conspiring against, or deliberately failing in their duty to the King is treated differently from ordinary criminal sentencing. The Prince, as the late King's heir, retains the right to demand judgment in matters concerning his father's death."

"Demand judgment," I repeated. "That is not the same thing as ordering an execution."

"No, Your Majesty. Ordinarily, it would not be."

"Then what am I missing?"

The sentinel glanced toward the corridor ahead.

"The Crown has not yet been formally transferred to you."

I stared at him.

"Go on."

"Until the coronation, you are Regent, which gives you authority to govern in the Crown's name. But the law does not make the Regent the sole holder of every prerogative belonging to the Royal House. In matters specifically concerning the late King, the heir retains certain powers until the succession is formally completed."

"So he can simply decide someone dies?"

"Not simply."

"Then how?"

"If the Prince invokes the royal prerogative concerning the protection and vengeance of the former sovereign, he can order the immediate punishment of those already formally accused of treason against the Crown."

"Vengeance?"

The word tasted foul in my mouth.

The sentinel lowered his voice.

"It is an old provision, Your Majesty. It is rarely invoked."

"And yet Johann has invoked it now."

"Yes."

"Without notifying me."

"That," the sentinel said cautiously, "is where the matter becomes less clear."

I narrowed my eyes.

"What does that mean?"

"The law gives him the authority to act. It does not expressly state that he must obtain the Regent's permission before exercising that authority."

"So he found a loophole."

"That would be one way of putting it."

"No. It is exactly what it is."

We continued down the corridor.

The more I thought about it, the angrier I became.

"He knows I ordered those men kept alive."

"I believe he does."

"He knows why."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"And he chose to execute them anyway."

The sentinel said nothing.

I looked at him.

"Why?"

He hesitated.

"Because the Prince may believe that your order concerned the administration of their punishment, while his authority concerns the crime itself."

I frowned.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that you can govern how the kingdom responds to them, but he believes he can determine what justice is owed for his father's murder."

My hands curled into fists.

"Justice."

The sentinel wisely said nothing.

We turned the final corner, and the courtyard came into view beyond the open archway.

A crowd had gathered around a raised wooden platform.

My stomach dropped.

The sentinel spoke quietly beside me.

"There is another possibility."

I glanced at him.

"What?"

"He may not have summoned the hangmen merely to exercise his right."

"What do you mean?"

The man looked toward the courtyard.

"If the Prince believes the kingdom is becoming divided over the succession, he may be trying to establish that his position still carries authority."

I understood then.

This was not entirely about the retainers.

Johann knew I had ordered them spared.

He knew I was the Regent.

And he knew exactly how his actions would look if he carried them out publicly.

This was not an accident.

It was a message.

He wanted everyone watching to understand that until the crown was physically placed upon my head, there were still powers in this kingdom he could exercise without my permission.

My pace quickened.

"I'm regent," I said. "If he wants to challenge my authority, he can do it to my face."

The sentinel lowered his gaze.

"That may be precisely what he intends, Your Majesty."

We stepped into the courtyard, and in that moment I shouted, "Stop this madness," everyone froze, dropping into hurried bows around me.

"What the hell is this about," I demanded, my voice tearing out louder than I intended.

"Justice," Johann said, standing at the platform's edge, entirely unbothered by my arrival.

He reached for a lever before I could get another word out and pulled it.

The floor beneath two of the retainers dropped away.

Shifter hangings were built differently from human ones, which were designed to be slower and far more cruel. Our ropes were woven from platinum wire, a material chosen not merely to restrain but to burn through shifter flesh. When the trapdoors opened, the wires snapped tight around their throats with the force of their falling bodies.

I watched the platinum bite into their skin, glowing against their necks as it cut deeper with every inch of the drop. There was no prolonged choking, no time for them to struggle or gasp for air. The wire sliced through flesh and muscle with such brutal efficiency that both men were beheaded before their bodies had completed the fall.

Their heads struck the platform first.

Their bodies followed a moment later, crumpling beneath them in a spreading mess of blood and torn flesh that I knew, even then, I would not be able to unsee for a very long time.

Everything went red at the edges of my vision.

I had promised Bonnie these men would be safe. I had promised her a small, manageable punishment instead of blood. And I'd been standing in a study, chasing torn pages and old ghosts, while my cousin turned that promise into a lie in front of an entire courtyard.

Chapter 119: Saved by the bell 1

EDELINA

I felt rather pleased with myself, walking the corridor with a spring in my step I hadn't managed in years. My mental checklist was already forming for the next call. My fake father, that convenient old alias I'd carved out decades ago, needed to whisper the right things into the right ears now, planting the seed of a succession war should it become necessary before Johann's birthday arrived and complicated everything beyond recovery.

I had the pieces arranged exactly where I wanted them, and the thought made my lips curve upward.

I ran through the timeline again as I walked.

The blood test.

The funeral appearance with Willow.

The rogues, quietly winding down before they became a liability rather than an asset.

Every piece was settling into place with a satisfying click, the kind of momentum I hadn't allowed myself to feel in months, not since Cornelius first started looking at me with suspicion instead of affection.

My phone buzzed against my palm.

I half-jerked upright, the number flashing across the screen stopping my breath for half a second.

Goddess... It was the rogue network. Those idiots.

I cut the call before it finished its first ring, my thumb jabbing the screen harder than necessary. Bradley could very well be intercepting communications through the kingdom's networks at this exact moment, hunting for exactly this kind of careless slip, and I refused to hand him something so easy after everything I'd already sacrificed to keep myself clean.

A message followed almost immediately, the little notification bubble popping up before I'd even fully lowered my arm.

Do not avoid us.

I thought I already told you we were done, I typed back, my thumbs moving fast and irritated. I am in treacherous waters and I do not need this. Why the heck are you still calling me?

Three dots appeared on the screen, blinking steadily while I waited, tapping one heeled foot against the stone floor.

We have been spreading the gift you blessed us with, the reply finally read. So far, only four have escaped death from the fifty three we shared it with.

A chuckle escaped me, low and dry, edged with something closer to contempt than amusement.

For starters, I typed, it is not a blessing.

I paused, my thumbs hovering over the screen, debating whether the explanation was even worth the effort of typing out for people who'd clearly never bothered learning their own history properly. I decided it was, if only to shut them up permanently.

Do you know why we're even capable of sharing this thing when werewolves ordinarily cannot? In the old days, some of your people believed we were right. That we stood on the correct side of history, whatever that side turned out to actually mean in the end. Plenty of

it came down to loved ones standing on our side of the conflict, people they could not bear to live without once the curse was passed around. The goddess granted those specific few a small mercy, and that mercy carried forward into what my people can still do now, generations later.

I let that sit a beat before finishing, my irritation bleeding fully into the words now.

I reread what I had written. The history was true enough, stripped down to its bones. The goddess had intervened when the pain of separation became too much for certain humans to bear, had granted them the ability to bridge the gap between species through blood and will. But that didn't make it holy. That didn't make it good.

It is no blessing. But you must present it as one, regardless of the truth. The four who survived clearly wanted this badly enough to earn it. The others plainly did not want it half as much, or they would have survived too. Give it only to people who genuinely, desperately want it. And stop contacting me directly. This channel is compromised the moment anyone at this estate decides to look closely enough.

I slid the phone into the small clutch at my hip and drew a slow breath, tipping my head back against the cool stone wall of the corridor, letting a moment of quiet settle over me before I continued toward wherever my next task waited.

When I opened my eyes, Willow was sprinting toward me.

Her hair had come loose from whatever elegant style she'd worn it in earlier, dark strands sticking damp to her forehead and the sides of her neck, and her eyes carried a wildness I hadn't seen from her before, not once, not even during the ritual with the rogue back in that dingy little infirmary room.

I stepped forward to meet her, my hands already reaching because why was Lycaon acting out. "What's wrong with you—"

She cut me off, breathless, her words tumbling out in a panicked, half-formed rush. "I know you. You're the Queen. You have to help me. There's a sick man in my head. He's killed people. He's actually killed people, and I don't know how long I've been gone, I don't remember hours, I don't remember—"

My stomach dropped straight through the floor, though I kept my face carefully composed.

This wasn't Lycaon standing in front of me. This was Willow herself, fully surfaced, terrified out of her mind, apparently emerging for the first time since he'd first claimed control of her body back in that infirmary bathroom or earlier than that.

I grabbed her by both shoulders, gripping tight enough to still some of her trembling, and cast a quick glance down the corridor in either direction, checking for witnesses to this particular unraveling.

"Come with me," I murmured, already steering her forward, my grip firm but my voice pitched soft and soothing, the exact tone I'd once used on Johann as a boy when nightmares chased him from his own bed.

I led her to Johann's chambers, glancing once more over my shoulder before I shut the door and turned the lock with a decisive click.

"Sit," I instructed, gesturing toward the chair near the window.

"Your Majesty..."

"I'm sure you're simply panicking," I continued, gesturing toward the bed with what I hoped read as calm reassurance. "Sit. Breathe. Tell me slowly."

"You're not listening to me." Her voice cracked entirely on that, and she pressed both hands against her temples like she could physically hold her own skull together through sheer pressure alone.

Chapter 120: Saved by the bell 2

EDELINA

"When I was called to help the Alpha King back at the infirmary, when I touched that girl and dug into the attack on her body and mind, some man seized control of my body. And he—"

She stopped mid-sentence.

Her eyes cut toward the door, then slowly back to my face, something dawning in them that I watched unfold in real time, horror bleeding into her expression like ink spreading through water.

"You," she whispered, taking a full step back from me now, putting distance between us that hadn't existed a heartbeat earlier. "Oh my goddess. You. You were part of... You knew. My memory is coming back and I know you knew. This whole time, you knew exactly what he was doing to me and you did nothing."

I felt my pulse spike.

Before I could form a single word of denial, before I could even open my mouth to attempt one of the smooth, practiced lies I'd been rehearsing my entire adult life, she raised one hand toward me, fingers splayed, and a pulse of raw, unrefined magic slammed straight into my chest.

It hit me hit worse than a physical blow.

I left the ground entirely.

My back struck the door frame hard enough that white pain exploded up my spine, stealing the breath clean out of my lungs, and before I could even attempt to steady myself against it, she wrenched the door open behind me with another violent burst of force, sending splinters flying across the floor. A second pulse followed the first, hurling me bodily across the room.

I hit the bed at an angle that offered no mercy whatsoever, my hip and shoulder taking the brunt of the impact, and the wooden frame beneath me gave way with a sharp, splintering crack, both sides collapsing inward as I sank into the wreckage of what had, moments earlier, been a perfectly serviceable piece of furniture.

Pain flared bright and immediate through my ribs, my hip, the base of my skull where it had clipped the headboard on the way down.

I opened my mouth, already composing the lie I intended to tell whoever came running at the noise, some story about a sudden, unprovoked magical attack, something that would deflect suspicion entirely away from me and squarely toward the conveniently psychotic intruder that was now Willow.

But then... Willow froze mid-motion.

Her entire body went rigid, one arm still half raised from the spell she'd just finished casting, and for a long, suspended moment nothing in the room moved at all. Not her. Not the dust still settling from the shattered door frame. Not even my own labored breathing, which I found myself holding without meaning to.

Then her shoulders rolled back, slow and deliberate. Her neck cracked, sharp and unbothered, followed by each of her knuckles in quick, casual succession, the sound of it entirely too relaxed given the violence that had just occurred in this very room seconds ago.

"Willow?" I managed. "Are you alright?"

"She is not, But I am."

I could not help but stare. "Huh?"

"It's me, I suppose she took over while I was gone," Willow's mouth said, though the voice beneath the familiar cadence had shifted entirely, deeper now, older, carrying weight her actual throat had never been built to hold.

"Lycaon," I managed, wincing hard through the pain still radiating across my entire back.

He nodded, crossing the room toward me with unhurried, almost lazy steps, and crouched down beside the wreckage of the bed to help me up, one hand steady and firm beneath my elbow.

"Are you hurt," he asked, tilting his head, studying my face with an attentiveness that felt almost insultingly calm given the circumstances.

"Of course I'm hurt," I snapped, my voice cracking with leftover adrenaline, and the words dissolved almost immediately into another wet, ragged cough, blood spattering thin and dark across my palm when I raised it hastily to cover my mouth.

"That's not ideal," he murmured, something almost clinical in his tone now, like he was assessing a minor inconvenience rather than the blood currently staining my hand.

He pressed Willow's palm flat against my chest, and I felt the warmth of soft blue light bloom instantly beneath his borrowed fingers, spreading through my body, knitting bone and bruised muscle back into something considerably closer to whole. The pain in my ribs eased first, then my hip, then the dull throb at the base of my skull, until I could finally draw a full breath without wincing through it.

When he finished, he turned toward the shattered bed frame and the door still hanging crooked and useless on one twisted hinge, waving one hand toward each in turn. Magic stitched splintered wood and warped metal fittings back into their original shapes with a low, groaning creak, the whole room resetting itself in a matter of seconds, as though none of it had ever happened at all.

"Where the fuck did you go," I demanded, my voice still shaking with leftover adrenaline as I straightened my dress with hands that weren't entirely steady. "That was terrifying, Lycaon. I genuinely thought she'd won over you, or worse, that you'd simply abandoned me here."

"I dream walked for a while," he said, brushing a loose strand of Willow's dark hair back from his face with an ease that still unsettled me every single time I watched him do it, borrowing her body's smallest human gestures like they'd always belonged to him. "That's all."

"That's all?" I repeated flatly, staring at him. "You disappear inside a body I've entrusted our entire plan to, leave her conscious and unguarded long enough to nearly expose both of us, and 'that's all' is the explanation you're offering me?"

He studied me a moment, something unreadable moving behind Willow's borrowed eyes.

"I found someone worth speaking to," he said finally, quiet now, almost thoughtful. "It took longer than I intended. I apologize for the inconvenience it caused you."

"Who," I asked, though something in his expression already told me I wasn't going to like whatever answer he gave me.

He only smiled, and said nothing further as he walked away

I was not a fan of this. I hated this. I ahted this so much. Was having Lycaon on my side not a liability?