

To heal a Rogue #Chapter 16: Bastard 1 - Read To heal a Rogue Chapter 16: Bastard 1

LYSANDER

The elder who'd suggested it did not so much as blink at my tone.

"It must be public, Alpha Lysander. That is rather the entire function of it." He folded his hands in front of him, patient in the way men were patient when they'd already won an argument and were simply waiting for the other party to catch up. "A quiet arrangement satisfies no one. The visiting Alphas need to see the crime answered. The Lunas need to carry word home that the new King handled a violation against his house with strength, not mercy hidden in a back room somewhere. If we do this quietly, it reads as weakness. It reads as a King unwilling to make hard decisions in his first hours. You cannot afford that impression right now, of all times."

"I am aware of what I cannot afford," I said. "I am telling you this particular solution costs more than it buys."

"It costs her something," the elder said, gently enough that it almost sounded like sympathy. "It costs you very little. That is, forgive me, rather the point of the arrangement."

I looked at him and thought about several things I could say. None of them would have moved him an inch, and every second I spent arguing in this library was a second longer she stayed in that cell with wolfsbane working through her skin. I could feel her through the bond even now, a low ache sitting behind my ribs like a held breath, and every part of me wanted to be moving toward her instead of standing here debating the optics of my own cruelty.

There was also this. I did not actually need their approval for what I intended to do once night came and the doors were closed and the visiting court had gone back to their rooms to sleep off the wine. Whatever ceremony they wanted to stage in front of witnesses was theater, and theater could be managed, redirected, quietly unmade in private once the audience had gone home. Let them have their spectacle. I would decide what happened to her once I had her somewhere safe and the eyes of a hundred foreign Alphas were no longer on either of us.

I exhaled slowly through my nose.

"Fine," I said. "Tonight, then."

The elder inclined his head, satisfied, and something in his posture eased the way a man's shoulders eased when a difficult negotiation had finally landed where he wanted it. "Wise choice, Alpha Lysander."

"I don't require the compliment." I stood from the chair, and the motion drew every eye in the room back to me. "This meeting is finished. I don't believe we need the full Elder Circle convened again today. You have what you need to manage the arrangements. I have a pack back home to hold together as well with all the new developments."

Nobody argued with that. They gathered their papers and their folios and filed out in

twos and threes, murmuring to each other in the low, satisfied tones, and within a few minutes the library had emptied of everyone except Johann, Cormac, and me. Cormac took one look at what remained of the room's temperature and decided his business was concluded as well. He tucked the folio under his arm, and went out the door without a backward glance.

That left Johann and me.

He hadn't moved from where he stood near the desk since the will reading finished. He was staring at the empty chair, the one I'd vacated only a moment ago, like it had personally wronged him, and when he finally looked up at me his eyes had lost every trace of the smooth composure he'd walked in wearing.

"You are not leaving this room," he said, "until you tell me what happened with my father."

I studied him for a moment. His jaw was tight, his breathing a fraction too fast, and beneath the outrage there was something else moving, something that looked uncomfortably close to fear.

"I think," I said carefully, "that only two people in this estate could have done something to warrant my uncle rewriting an entire succession three weeks before he died. And I am fairly confident it was not me."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means what it means, Johann."

"Say it plainly." His voice had risen. "You've spent this entire morning speaking in riddles designed to make me look guilty in front of the one circle of people whose opinion actually matters. Say what you're implying, or admit you have nothing and this is simply cruelty for its own sake. You fucking have Lily of the Valley for fuck's sake."

I considered how much to give him. My uncle's confession still sat in my chest like something I hadn't finished swallowing, a secret he'd handed me in a library not unlike this one, hours before someone put a bullet in him. I hadn't decided yet what I owed Johann in the way of truth, whether kindness or cowardice would be served by keeping it from him.

"Uncle told me something interesting," I said finally, "before he died. Something I don't think you know." I paused. "Your mother, however, I suspect knows it very well."

Johann's face did something complicated. Confusion first, quick and genuine, and then something wary underneath it.

"What does that mean."

"Ask her."

"I am asking you." He took a step closer, close enough that I had to hold my ground or visibly retreat, and I chose to hold it. "You clearly think you know something. So stop being political about it and say it with your full mouth, cousin, or I will assume you're bluffing to unsettle me."

"I'd rather not have this conversation in an open room."

"Excuse me?"

I turned toward the door, intending to simply leave the rest for a room with fewer ears and less blood still drying into the rug, when Johann's boot caught me hard across the back of the calf, buckling my knee before I could catch myself.

"Fucking talk," he snapped.

That did it. Whatever patience I'd been holding onto through the will reading and the elders and their disgusting old tradition finished burning off in that single moment, and I turned back to him with something considerably less careful in my expression.

"Fine," I said. "It is a known fact that a bastard cannot take the Alpha's throne."

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

To heal a Rogue #Chapter 17: Bastard 2 - Read To heal a Rogue Chapter 17: Bastard 2

LYSANDER

The room went very still.

"What are you implying." His voice had dropped low, quiet in a way that was somehow worse than shouting.

"I told you. Ask your mother."

Johann stared at me, and for a moment I watched him actually consider it, watched the wheels turn behind his eyes as he ran the accusation forward to its logical end and tried to decide whether it was possible. Then he laughed. It came out dark and short, no real humor in it anywhere.

"If that is genuinely what my father believed," he said, "if that is what pushed him to gut his own will three weeks before someone put a bullet in his chest, then I will fight it. In front of the full council if I have to. I will not be erased on the basis of some deathbed accusation you claim he whispered to you alone in a room with no witnesses."

"Expose yourself," I said. "And your mother? In front of the full council? That's your plan?"

"I am not a fucking bastard." The words came out sharp enough to draw blood on their own. "I have his blood in me. Royal blood. Same as you, cousin, whether you care to admit it or not."

I looked at him for a long moment, at the true fury sitting raw and unguarded on his face for the first time since he'd walked into this library this morning, and something in me decided to press harder instead of easing off.

"You've been acting like a cold bastard since the moment you arrived here," I said. "No grief for your father's body. No hesitation putting your hand around an innocent girl's throat within an hour of his death."

"I'm supposed to smile and shit with the girl who killed my—"

"She is an Omega! In what world would that be possible? You have been Nothing but calculating about the will and the chair." I let that sit before I finished it. "Is that how badly you wanted the throne, Johann? Badly enough that when he implied he was

changing his mind or maybe you even found out, you decided to make sure he never got the chance to follow through?"

"What the fuck."

He shoved me. Hard, both hands flat against my chest, hard enough that I stumbled back a full step before catching myself against the edge of the desk.

"Are you asking if I killed my own father?" His voice cracked on the word father, the first genuine break I'd heard from him all morning. "Is that what you're standing there implying, in the room where his body was lying an hour ago?"

"I'm sure everyone with half a brain is already thinking it," I said, and I kept my voice level even as his hands curled into fists at his sides. "Your father changes his mind. Cuts you and your mother out entirely. You find out, and you're furious, and before he can actually follow through and announce it to the world, you make sure he never gets the chance. Must suck that you weren't fast enough."

"Not everyone is as heartless as you." His eyes were bright with something dangerous, something that wanted very badly to hit me and was doing the arithmetic on whether it could win that exchange. "We both know that, don't we, cousin."

I let that pass without comment. Whatever he thought he knew, whatever ugly little theory he was nursing about what I might have done, it wasn't worth engaging right now. I had a different target, and I could feel him getting closer to it with every exchange.

"In your case," I said instead, "it wouldn't even be heartless. He isn't your father. Not by blood. So killing him would just be removing an obstacle. Nothing more sentimental than that." I tilted my head slightly. "Is that why you weren't at the party last night? Convenient timing, don't you think? The one night everything fell apart, and you happened to be somewhere else entirely."

"My mother was sick." His jaw worked. "My father asked me to check on her. That is the whole of it."

"Sick." I let the word sit there, unconvinced. "Your family owns the De'Lune estate's medical wing. Top-grade healers on retainer around the clock, an infirmary large enough to treat half this great pack at once, and yet the Queen needed her son at her bedside instead of a healer."

"My father didn't want the news spreading." Something flickered across his face, uncertainty creeping in where the anger had been. "He said it was delicate. Said it needed to stay quiet. I believed him. I thought I was doing something for my family." He stopped, and I watched the realization land on him in real time, slow and sickening, the way understanding arrived when it was the last thing you wanted to understand. "Or so I thought. It seems like it was all a plan. Get me and my mother out of the way, off in some quiet corner off the estate, so he could rewrite everything without either of us close enough to stop it."

"That would be a reasonable read of it."

"I am still his son." His voice had gone rough. "Whatever he believed, whatever lies he

fed you in his last hours, I have his blood, and I will fight you for that throne, cousin. In front of the full council. In front of every pack in this territory if that's what it takes."

I studied him for a moment. There was something almost pitiable in him now, standing in the wreckage of everything he'd been promised since birth, and some smaller, quieter part of me almost regretted how thoroughly I'd just taken him apart.

Almost.

"I believe you," I said. "And I believe you'll lose." I let the silence stretch before I finished it. "Because we both know. We both know what's true here, whatever you tell yourself in the meantime. I trust what uncle told me. He had no reason to lie to me in his final hours, and every reason to lie to you for as long as he possibly could."

Johann stared at me. Something in his face finally cracked all the way through, the last of the composure sliding off entirely, and for one moment he looked less like a prince fighting for his inheritance and more like a boy who'd just watched the floor disappear beneath him.

Then he turned and walked out, boots striking hard against the stone, and he didn't look back once.

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

To heal a Rogue #Chapter 18: The secret - Read To heal a Rogue Chapter 18: The secret

JOHANN

One night ago, I stood in some debilitated wing in a rundown ghetto street and watched my mother disappear into a hospital bed that seemed built for someone twice her size.

The tubes ran into the back of her hand and up into a bag hanging from a silver pole, and there was a monitor beside her chanting its slow, steady rhythm, and every part of it made my stomach turn in a way I hadn't felt since I was young enough to be scared of things I couldn't name.

"This is ridiculous," I said, pacing the length of the room because standing still felt impossible. "We have entire wing dedicated to guests, Diplomats, visiting Lunas and Alphas. And he put you here for some reason, in a corner out of town with a healer I've never even met, like you're some Omega he should not waste his breath on."

"Johann."

"No, I want to understand this." I stopped at the foot of her bed, and I could feel my jaw working, the anger sitting hot and close under my skin. "Father has the finest healers in this entire territory on retainer. Top of their class, trained under the De'Lune house for eons most likely. And instead of putting you in the royal suite with all of them hovering over you, he ships you off to some healer house I've never heard of and tells me to keep it quiet." I shook my head. "Is he punishing you? Is this about something between the two of you? Because if he is doing something, if there is someone else—"

"Johann."

"—because I will not stand here and let him treat you like an inconvenience while he goes off and does whatever he wants at some party. It is starting to feel like he has a mistress. Does he?"

"Johann." My mother's voice cracked through the room, not loud, but sharp enough to actually stop me. She looked exhausted, the kind of exhausted that sat behind the eyes and didn't come from a single bad night. "Sit down. Please."

I sat, because I always did what she asked, even furious, even convinced I already understood everything that mattered.

"What your father did," she said, "is closer to kindness than anything else. Believe it or not." Her mouth curved into something that wasn't quite a smile. "There is likely a political calculation buried somewhere in it too. There usually is, with him. But it is not punishment, and it is not another woman."

"Then what is it? Because I have been sick with worry for a week, and every explanation I've been given makes less sense than the last one."

She was quiet for a moment, her fingers picking at the edge of the blanket covering her legs.

"I deceived your father," she said finally.

I blinked at her. "I don't understand."

"Get up," she said. "Put the do-not-disturb notice on the door. Close it fully. Then sit back down."

I did as she asked, my heart picking up speed with every step, because my mother did not ask for privacy like this. Not from healers, not from staff, and certainly not from me. I hung the small placard on the outer handle, shut the door until the latch clicked, and returned to the chair beside her bed.

"I was never a Luna," she said, once I'd sat.

The words landed strangely, like she'd spoken them in a language I only half understood. "What do you mean you were never a Luna. You've been Luna for over thirty years. You are the Luna."

"I mean I was never born one. I was never made one through any bond your father believes in. What I am, Johann, is something else, and this illness I've been carrying, the one your father's healers finally caught after I spent decades hiding it, is hereditary. Passed down. Handed to my line by the gods themselves, if you believe the old stories, as something between a gift and a curse."

"I'm confused." I actually laughed, though there was no humor in it, just the particular disbelief that comes from hearing something you cannot fit anywhere in your understanding of the world. "You're not making sense."

"Do you remember that rhyme?" she asked. "The one you learned as a boy. The first one your nurse used to sing you to sleep with."

"What does a children's rhyme have to do with any of this?"

"Everything, Johann." Her eyes held mine, steady despite how tired she looked.

"Everything."

Then she sang it, low and rough, her voice catching on notes it clearly used to hit clean when she was younger.

*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 sat there staring at her, waiting for the punchline, for the moment she'd explain what any of that had to do with tubes in her arm and a hidden hospital stay and my father sending me away like a child who couldn't handle the truth.

"Werewolves," she said, "are the children wrapped in silver light. The faithful ones. The Moon's favored." She paused, and something in her expression shifted into a kind of grim resolve I'd never seen on her before. "The Night children are you and I."

"What does that even mean?" My voice had gone thin. I hated how thin it sounded.

"Johann." She reached for my hand, and I let her take it even though every instinct in me wanted to pull away from whatever she was about to say. "I am this sick because of a curse. I have carried it since birth, hidden it as it festered, since I was old enough to understand what it meant if anyone found out, and I did a very good job of hiding it for a very long time. Your father discovered it three weeks ago. He forced me into the royal infirmary after I collapsed during a council dinner, and once his healers got their hands on me, they found what I had been keeping quiet for years since we got married."

"What did they find?"

She was quiet for a long moment, choosing her words the way she chose everything, carefully, deliberately, like a woman laying stones across a river she didn't fully trust.

"When I was young," she said, "before I ever met your father, I was taught a different rhyme. You should know it too. It belongs to you as much as it belongs to me."

"Mother—"

"Listen."

I closed my mouth and listened, because there was something in her voice that demanded it, something older and heavier than anything I'd heard from her before.

Before the Moon chose fang and fur,

*The First Ones walked beside with her.
They raised no claw without a cause,
They kept the ancient, sacred laws.
But blood can blind the brightest eyes,
Even hearts that rule the skies.
She looked upon her favored brood,
And called their hunger pure and good.
The faithful knelt, the faithful stayed,
While all her warmth on wolves was laid.
The light she gave was ours before,
Until she closed the silver door.
Our gifts became a heavy chain,
Our strength was forged through grief and pain.
She named them blessed, she named us cursed,
Though we had walked beside her first.
So lift your head and bear the scar,
We know exactly who we are.
We need no moon to make us whole,
Our honor lives within the soul.
Let wolves cry loud beneath her light,
And boast her favor through the night.
A borrowed blessing fades with dawn,
But truth endures when gods have gone.*

The words hung in the room after she finished, and something about them sat wrong in my chest, a wrongness I couldn't name yet but could feel crawling under my skin all the same.

"Why does that sound like it's vilifying the Moon Goddess," I said slowly, "and praising whatever these Night children are supposed to be?"

My mother didn't answer right away.

Instead, she sighed, long and slow, the kind of exhale that seemed to come from somewhere far deeper than her lungs, and as she did it, her eyes changed.

The warm brown I had known my entire life bled into something else, a black so total it swallowed the white around it, midnight pouring in from the edges until there was nothing human left in her gaze at all. It held for two seconds, maybe three, long enough for me to feel every hair on my arms rise and my chair scrape back against the floor before I'd even decided to move.

Then it receded, just as quickly as it had come, and her eyes were her own again, tired and brown and watching me with something that looked almost like grief.

I had already put half the room between us, my back against the wall beside the door, my breath coming too fast and too shallow to be useful for anything.

"Mother," I said, and the word came out cracked down the middle.

"I am a Lycan," she said quietly. "And so are you."

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

To heal a Rogue #Chapter 19: Past sin - Read To heal a Rogue Chapter 19: Past sin

JOHANN

I laughed.

It came out of me before I could stop it, sharp and disbelieving, the kind of laugh that had nowhere else to go. "You're insane." I said it plainly, because it felt like the only sane response left to me. "You have officially lost your mind, and I don't know if it's the disease or the medication they've got dripping into your arm, but you are not a Lycan, Mother. Lycans are a bedtime horror story. They are the thing werewolf children get told about so they behave. They do not even exist."

"It's true," she said, and her voice held none of the wildness I would have expected from someone spinning a delusion. It was calm. Steady. Worse, somehow, for being so composed. "That makes you part Lycan and part werewolf. A combination that has not existed in living memory, Johann. You have no idea how special you are. How badly your grandfather and I orchestrated to have you."

"Orchestrated." I repeated the word like it might taste different the second time. "What does that even mean?"

"You are our salvation."

"I am very confused, Mother." My back was still against the wall. I hadn't moved from it since her eyes had done that thing, that impossible thing, and some part of me was still waiting for her to laugh and tell me it had been a trick of the light. "And you are starting to scare me."

She studied me for a long moment, and something in her face softened, the way it used to when I was small and frightened of something in the dark corner of my room and she needed to explain why the shadow wasn't going to hurt me.

"You know the history," she said. "The werewolf version. The one every pup gets taught before they're old enough to shift." She didn't wait for me to confirm it. "Long before kingdoms were built, before vampires learned to walk among men, before witches learned to bargain with the world for their magic, there was Selene."

"Mother—"

"Let me finish."

I let her finish, because some old habit of obedience was still stronger than my growing unease.

"Every night she crossed the sky," she said, "watching the world below, taking interest where her sisters did not. She looked at humanity and chose a handful of souls. The ones who protected their families. The ones who kept their word. The ones who lived in harmony with the world around them rather than tearing at it. She gifted them pieces of her own light. That became the first shifters." Her mouth curved, thin and humorless. "A divine blessing. Under every phase of the moon they grew stronger, faster, more connected to each other, and yet they kept full control of themselves. Some of them were closer to her than the rest. Close enough to calm wild beasts, heal wounds with a touch, push back darkness itself." She paused. "The story conveniently leaves out that those particular ones carried her blood directly. Not a gift given. A bloodline shared."

"Okay," I said slowly, because I didn't know what else to say, and because some part of me wanted her to keep talking so I didn't have to think too hard yet about what any of it meant.

"Eventually," she continued, "some of them grew greedy according to that flawed tale. They used the strength she gave them to conquer villages. To slaughter people who couldn't fight back. To rule through fear instead of the harmony she'd chosen them for in the first place. Selene didn't strip the blessing away." Her eyes had gone distant, fixed on something past me, past the wall, past the room entirely. "She twisted it instead. The silver light inside them curdled into something else. Hunger. Their instincts swallowed whatever humanity they had left. Their shifts became agony instead of grace. They lost themselves completely under every phases of the moon, especially the full moon, and their golden eyes, once a mark of her favor, started burning with something closer to bloodlust than divinity." She looked back at me. "Those became the first cursed wolves. *The Lycans*."

"Right," I said. "That's the story. Everyone knows that story."

"That is not the truth." Something in her voice hardened, an edge slipping in beneath the calm. "Our song is the truth, Johann. We loved her first. We fought for her, spread her word before the wolves she defends to death now ever had the heart to carry it. A god walked among us and lived at our side and loved our kin as her own. But her own grief, a loss that was no fault of ours, blinded her eventually. She decided she no longer needed us." Her jaw tightened. "We stopped being the perfect creations in her eyes. We became simply monsters, and so she made us into exactly that."

I stared at her. I didn't know what to do with my hands, so I crossed my arms instead, holding myself together with something that felt embarrassingly close to physical effort.

"A torment," she said, "so complete that no man born into our bloodline lives to see twenty-five. The women die just as young, or they live long enough while they suffer unimaginable pain and sickness, until they either end it themselves or life ends it for them." Her eyes met mine, steady and unflinching. "I have suffered. I have survived, against every likelihood that says I shouldn't have. My people, Johann. Your people. We

have endured this for longer than you can imagine, waiting for what's coming."

"I'm twenty-three, Mother."

The words came out before I'd fully processed why I'd said them, some small animal part of my brain doing math it didn't want to do, running toward the one detail in everything she'd said that actually applied to me directly.

"I did not think you needed to know any of this sordid history until now," she said quietly.

"Because I might die." My voice cracked somewhere in the middle of the sentence, and I hated that it did. "Is that it? Is that what you're telling me? That I have two years left, if I'm one of your precious Night children, and you decided this was a good time to mention it?"

"You would get the throne," she said, and there was something almost pleading in how quickly she said it, like the words were meant to be comforting.

"As if Father would just conveniently die in time for that to matter." The bitterness came out of me faster than I could soften it, uglier than I meant it to sound, and the second it left my mouth something shifted behind my eyes, some thought arriving before I was ready for it. "Will he? Are you..."

My mother's face didn't move. "Of course not."

I didn't believe the flatness of her answer nearly as much as I wanted to.

"...And what does the throne have to do with any of this?" I said instead, because pursuing the other thread felt like standing too close to a cliff edge in the dark. "The Lycan curse, the bloodline, whatever this is. What does the Alpha King's seat have to do with a god's grudge against her own children?"

My mother reached for the water glass on the table beside her bed, took a slow sip, and set it back down with the careful precision of someone buying herself a moment to choose her next words.

"During the age of legend," she said, "after she condemned us, that cruel goddess decided to offer something she called kindness. I call it mockery, personally, but the histories remember it as mercy." Her eyes found mine and held them. "Selene decreed the curse would not be eternal. That one day, should the blood she rejected and the blood she favored become one again, joined properly, the gates she closed on us would open."

"I don't understand."

"Neither did our ancestors," she said. "Not at first. It took generations for anyone to work out what she actually meant by it." A small, humorless smile crossed her face. "But we did, eventually. We always do."

I felt something cold settle into my chest, the shape of an idea forming before she'd even said it outright, the pieces sliding into place with a horrible kind of inevitability.

"The Alpha King's seat," I said slowly, "is what governs the entire werewolf world." I heard my own voice as if from a distance, flat and mechanical, working through the logic even as every part of me wanted to refuse it. "And you are currently heir to

whatever throne governs your people. The Lycans. Crowned Queen, or whatever title your kind actually uses."

"Yes."

"And I am your son." The cold in my chest spread lower, into my stomach, settling there like something with weight. "Which makes me heir to that as well. Whatever it is. Whoever your people actually are."

"Yes," she said again, quieter this time.

"So if I hold the seat of the Alpha King," I said, the words coming slower now, each one costing something to say aloud, "and I also hold whatever seat waits for me among your people. Both crowns. Both bloodlines, joined in one hand."

My mother didn't answer right away. She simply watched me, waiting for me to finish the thought myself.

"You end the curse," she said finally, when I didn't finish it on my own. "That is what the old song promises, Johann. Should the blood she rejected and the blood she favored ever become one again, held by a single hand, in a single crown. You would not simply inherit two thrones." Her voice dropped lower, and something in it trembled now, something that sounded less like triumph and more like desperate hope wrapped around decades of buried grief. "You would be the one who finally closes the distance she opened between us. You would be the one who ends what she started."

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

To heal a Rogue #Chapter 20: I Don't Intend to Reject You - Read To heal a Rogue Chapter 20: I Don't Intend to Reject You

LYSANDER

The stairs leading down to the holding block reeked of wet stone and rusted iron, each step dragging me deeper into a headache I pretended I didn't deserve, though I knew better. I'd signed up for this hours ago in a library, making promises I planned to unravel the moment I had the power to do it right.

I found her cell at the end of the corridor.

I glimpsed her before my mind caught up, and then the truth crashed in, brutal and whole. She was crumpled against the bars, cheek pressed to the cold stone, blood dried black near her ear and jaw. The wolfsbane rope had chewed her wrists raw, the skin beneath angry and red, still weeping in places that should have stopped bleeding hours ago. Her breaths came thin and fragile. Far too thin.

A cold, blinding hush swept through my chest.

"What happened to her?" My voice came out low, and I felt the sentinel stationed at the end of the hall flinch at the sound of it before I'd even turned to look at him.

He didn't answer fast enough.

Another sentinel, younger, standing a few feet back, made the mistake of answering for him. "He hit her," he said, nodding toward the first man. "With his rifle. She said something, and he—"

I didn't let him finish.

My hands found the first sentinel's collar before my thoughts could catch up, slamming him into the stone wall so hard the sound shattered down the corridor like a gunshot. He let out a noise, half-grunt, half-plea, and I struck him again before it faded. My knuckles split open on the second or third blow, but I barely registered the pain. All I felt was the sharp, relentless fury of watching his face buckle under my fist, knowing it would never be enough to erase what he'd done to her.

"Alpha Lysander—" someone started.

"Release her." I didn't look away from the man in my grip. "Now."

Nobody moved.

I let the sentinel crumple to the floor, watched him slide down the wall in a heap, then turned on the others with a look that made even the innocent ones recoil.

"I said release her."

"Alpha Lysander," the ranking one said carefully, "the prisoner's confinement was ordered by—"

"I'm sure you've all heard the rumors flying through this estate today," I said, keeping my voice level in a way that felt like holding a blade steady with my hand shaking. "About who's about to sit on the throne. About whose word is about to carry more weight in this great Kingdom than anyone else's." I let that settle. "I'd think carefully before deciding those rumors don't apply to you yet."

The silence that followed bit down, sharp and unforgiving.

Then the ranking sentinel nodded, once, and moved to the cell door, the keys in his hands shaking slightly as he worked the lock. Another one crouched beside her and started on the ropes, and I watched every second of it, watched the wolfsbane fiber peel away from skin that had gone raw and weeping beneath it, and I had to lock my jaw to keep from making a sound myself.

She didn't look at me while they worked. She kept her eyes on the floor, on her own hands, anywhere but my face, and I understood that. I didn't try to force it.

Once the rope was gone, she pushed herself up slowly, using the bars for leverage, and I had to stop myself from reaching for her. She wouldn't have wanted that. I could feel it even without the bond telling me so. I also could not show why I was so protective of her at the moment. Though it was becoming increasingly clear that I was doing a bad job.

"Come with me," I said quietly. "We need to talk."

She followed without argument, which told me more about how much pain she was in than anything else could have.

We climbed the stairs in silence, her footsteps trailing mine, her breath ragged. Halfway

up, I felt a subtle shift through the bond, a careful thought blooming, dangerously close to flight.

"Don't," I said, without turning around. "Please don't think about running."

"I wasn't."

"That's a lie."

The instant I spoke, I felt her close something off inside, a door slamming shut behind the walls she'd built to survive hiding for so long. The bond fell silent, telling me everything and nothing. All I could sense was fear, and beneath it, a raw edge of disgust—though whether it was for me, herself, or the mess she'd woken into, I couldn't say.

I stopped on the stairs. She had no choice but to stop behind me, close enough now that I could hear every unsteady breath she took.

I turned to face her.

"You knocked me out," I said.

She didn't answer right away. Her eyes came up to meet mine, wary, guarded, and something in them dared me to make this harder than it already was.

"Were you planning to run," I said, "because I'd figured you out?"

She swallowed. I watched her throat move, watched her decide how much of the truth she could afford to give me.

"I don't want anything to do with you," she said finally.

The words landed somewhere sharp in my chest, and I let them sit there without flinching, because I understood, in some distant part of myself, that she believed every syllable of it.

"I can't reject you either," she continued, quieter now, like the admission cost her something to make. "Not with what I am. So I'm asking you." Her chin came up, some last reserve of dignity holding her spine straight even now, even bruised and bleeding and standing three steps below me in a stairwell that smelled like old iron. "Reject me. Please. You're going to be Alpha King. It would be a disgrace for you to have an Omega mate. A rogue one, at that. Unregistered. Disguised as a man for many years to survive." Her voice cracked slightly on the last part, and she pressed her lips together like she regretted letting it show. "You have an entire kingdom watching you now and surely political enemies who will not be happy with the late king's choice. I would only be a liability standing next to you."

I looked at her for a long moment.

I thought about Fia. About her voice, steady and certain, the way she'd looked at me months ago and told me I would find someone. I hadn't believed her then. I'd filed it away the way I filed away most things I didn't have room to examine, tucked into some drawer in my mind labeled later.

Apparently, later had arrived last night, wrapped in a rut-blind haze, in a room thick with the scent of honey and sugar.

I let out a slow breath.

"Someone I care about very much," I said, "once told me I would find you."

Her eyes narrowed slightly, confusion cutting through the wariness for just a moment.

I took in her hair, loose and unhidden, platinum strands catching the faintest light in the stairwell—unmistakable, strange, and utterly hers. Nothing else in this Kingdom, this territory, maybe this world, looked like it. Something inside me eased at the sight, unexpected and sure.

"She was right," I said. "About more than I gave her credit for."

"That doesn't answer what I asked you."

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

I held her gaze, and I let her see whatever she needed to see in my face, because I was done pretending this was a debate I intended to lose.

"I don't intend to reject you," I said. "Not now. Not tomorrow, once this is all sorted and the eyes of the visiting court have gone home." I paused, letting the words land the way I meant them to. "Not ever."

Something moved across her face, too fast to fully name, gone before I could decide if it was hope or terror or some tangled version of both.

"You don't even know me," she said, but her voice had lost some of its conviction.

"I know you didn't kill my uncle," I said. "I know despite wanting to escape, you still dragged yourself across a library floor to try to save a dying man who'd done nothing to earn that kindness from you. Just like how I know you knocked me unconscious with a precision that took real training, and then you ran, because staying meant becoming exactly the kind of complication you'd spent years avoiding." I took the last step down between us, close enough now that she had to tilt her head back slightly to hold my eyes. "I think I know enough."

She didn't answer that. She just stood there, breathing unevenly, staring up at me like she was waiting for the rest of the world to catch up to what I'd just said and prove it wrong.

I didn't think it would.

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