

To heal a Rogue #Chapter 21: The gift of the bite -

Read To heal a Rogue Chapter 21: The gift of the bite

JOHANN

I turned the key in my chamber door before dialing her, because some conversations demanded secrecy, even from the sentinels outside who feigned deafness but could hear through solid oak if they wished.

She picked up on the second ring.

"Johann." Her voice came through thin and tired, the way it had sounded every time I'd spoken to her since the infirmary, since the tubes, since the truth she'd handed me like a stone I hadn't asked to carry. "Is everything—"

"Did you do anything?" I kept my voice flat, stripped of whatever emotion might give her room to maneuver around the question. "Mother. I need you to answer me plainly, for once in your life."

A pause lingered on the other end, stretching just long enough to betray the weight of secrets she carried.

"Do anything about what?" she said finally.

"Don't." The word came out sharper than I meant it to. "Father is dead. Someone put a bullet in his chest last night, in his own library, in our own estate, hours after he stripped me and you out of his will like we were strangers he'd never met." I pressed my palm flat against the cool wall beside me, needing something solid under my hand. "So I am going to ask you one more time, and I need the truth. Did you have anything to do with it?"

The silence grew until I caught the subtle shift in her breathing, the telltale catch that meant she was weighing how much truth I could bear.

"I didn't tell you," she said quietly, "because I knew you wouldn't agree with me."

Something cold settled into my stomach, heavier than anything I'd felt since the hospital room, since her eyes had gone black and then human again like something out of a nightmare I couldn't wake from.

"Mother."

"But it all worked out," she continued, and there was something almost pleading in her tone now, like she genuinely believed the words could still land as comfort. "In the end. Didn't it? Your father is dead. There will also be dead men walking to answer for it, men who would take the blame and disappear quietly into whatever fresh hell the sentinels decided was worthy for them, and you would take the throne. We would win, Johann. Finally, after everything. I would ask the goddess for forgiveness for the method. I would carry that. But it would pass. All of it would pass, and you would be sitting exactly where you were always meant to sit."

I laughed.

It came out of me broken and disbelieving, nothing like real humor in it anywhere, and I heard her go quiet on the other end of the line, waiting for whatever came next.

"No," I said. "Your fantasy didn't come true, Mother. Not even close." I pushed off the wall and started pacing, because standing still while I said this felt impossible. "Father is dead, yes. You got that part right. But there are no dead men to take the blame. There's a girl though. A retainer who saw your mercenaries with her own eyes, who is very much alive right now, sitting somewhere in this estate breathing and talking and telling anyone who will listen that two masked men shot the King and put the gun in her hand."

"What?" Her voice had lost its careful, pleading softness entirely.

"I suspected this had your hand all over it the second I heard her account," I said. "So I tried to end her myself, quietly, before she could become a problem for either of us. Except my cousin is obsessed with keeping her alive for some reason." I stopped pacing near the window, staring out at the estate grounds without really seeing any of it. "And to be frank, I have a theory about why, Mother. I think he suspects us."

"Cousin," she repeated, and something in her voice had gone very still, very careful. "Who?"

"Lysander." I let the name sit there, heavy, because I wanted her to feel exactly how much weight it carried now. "The very man Father named his heir."

The silence on the other end of the line went on long enough that I thought the call had dropped.

"What," she said finally, and it wasn't a question so much as a demand for the sentence to be untrue.

"It's real," I said. "It's in the will. Read aloud by High Gamma Cormac himself, in front of the full Elder Circle, notarized and dated three weeks ago." I felt my jaw tighten around the words. "Which means Father decided this the same week he found out what you actually are. The same week he shipped you off to some quiet corner out of the Kingdom so no one would ask questions." I turned back into the room. "It is written in front of witnesses. In front of anyone with political weight in this territory. There is no undoing it through denial."

"Three weeks," she said, and I heard something crack in her voice, some last piece of composure finally giving way. "He didn't say a word to me. Not one word."

"He wouldn't have," I said. "Not once he found out you'd deceived him for so many years."

"And Lysander," she said slowly, working through it even as she spoke, "why would your father choose him? Of every option, every relation, why him specifically?"

I hesitated for a moment, because saying it out loud made it feel more permanent, more real, and some small stubborn part of me had been avoiding that permanence since the moment Lysander had said it to my face in the library.

"For some reason," I said, "Father peddled the idea to Lysander that I was a bastard. That you'd deceived Father about my parentage entirely, and that was reason enough to strip us both of any claim to the throne." I heard her breath catch through the phone. "I think it was probably to make sure Lysander would actually want the seat once it was offered to him. Give him a reason to believe he deserved it more than I did."

"That is not true," she said, quiet and furious at once. "You are his son. Every drop of blood in you came from him and from me."

"I know that," I said. "But knowing it doesn't undo what's already been read aloud in a room full of elders who will now most likely believe otherwise or worse."

I heard her moving on the other end, footsteps uneven as she paced as I had, then a deep, wet cough that twisted something old and helpless in my chest, a fear I had never truly outgrown.

"Mother—"

"We were so close," she said, once the coughing settled, her voice thinner now, worn down at the edges. "So close, Johann. I thought, once you took that throne, once you sat where your father sat and held both bloodlines under one crown, that this curse we've carried for nearly a thousand years would finally break. That I would be part of the last of us to suffer through it. That you would never have to watch your own body turn against you the way mine has, the way every one of our line has since the goddess first cursed us for a crime we didn't commit."

"Mother, please—"

"But no." Her voice cracked entirely on that single word, raw and furious and grieving all at once. "Now the throne sits with your cousin, a man who has no idea what he actually holds in his hands, who probably thinks this is simply about politics and succession and nothing more, while the actual weight of what's at stake slips further and further away from us."

"I know," I said quietly, because there was nothing else to offer her in that moment, no comfort that wouldn't have been a lie.

"I don't want to die like my predecessors," she said, and the fear in her voice was old, deep, something she'd clearly been carrying silently for far longer than the three weeks since Father's healers had found her out. "I don't want that for you either, Johann. I have watched women in our bloodline waste away by their thirties. I have watched men in our line die before they ever got the chance to understand what they were losing or enjoy life. I have spent my entire life terrified of the moment my body would finally collect what it's owed, and I thought, I truly believed, that you were going to be the one who ended it. For all of us. For everyone who comes after us."

"I know," I said again, because it was the only true thing I had left to give her.

"We have to salvage this," she said, and I heard something harden in her voice now, the grief folding itself back into resolve, into the particular steel she'd always carried beneath the surface no matter how sick she got. "Whatever it takes. You have to get that throne back, Johann. It isn't simply ambition anymore. It isn't simply pride, or

inheritance, or proving something to a dead man who never deserved either of our loyalty in the first place." Her voice dropped lower, more urgent. "It is what the prophecy demands. It is the only chance the Lycan race will ever have."

I stood at the window, watching sentinels patrol the grounds in slow, careful arcs. By evening, more Alphas and Lunas would arrive, bearing both condolences and scrutiny. I did not have time for this shit. Since Mother had mentioned how we would end up, I was doing everything in my power to avoid that fate.

"I know," I said, for the third time, and this time I meant it as a vow rather than an acknowledgment. "I know what has to happen, Mother. Give me time."

"Time is the one thing neither of us actually has."

"Then I'll move quickly," I said, and I felt something settle into place behind my ribs, cold and clear and entirely without mercy. "But you have to help me too."

"In what way?" She asked.

"Your fall guys... Killing an Alpha King is insane and foolish. What did you convince them with?"

"The gift of the bite." She replied.

"What does that mean?"

"Lycans can share the curse, and they wanted it badly because they are disgruntled rogues after all."

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

To heal a Rogue #Chapter 22: Her Name - Read To heal a Rogue Chapter 22: Her Name

LYSANDER

"Why am I even surprised?" she said, her gaze drilling into the stairwell wall as if it might confess its secrets. "You're Lily of the Valley. Of course your people would pull something like this."

"Something like what?"

"What do you intend to make me?" She finally met my eyes, her stare sharp as broken glass. "A forced bride? Some toy for you to use whenever you please?" Her jaw locked. "I might not have killed your uncle. But I can absolutely kill you."

A laugh slipped out before I could stop it, low and clipped, carrying more disbelief than any real humor.

"You think I'm joking," she said.

"Perhaps if you weren't shielding, I'd know for certain." I watched her, noting the careful mask she'd drawn over her features the instant we left the cell. "But I'm here to help you. Maybe try looking at me as something other than the enemy. A little kindness wouldn't kill you."

She dropped her head, and for a heartbeat, a sound almost like a sob trembled in her throat before she strangled it. "Fuck. What did I ever do to deserve this?"

"I can't be that terrible a mate." I let a crooked grin slip through, just to see if it would spark anything. "If it's my bedroom skills you're worried about, I apologize. That was mostly my wolf, not me."

I meant it as a joke, a way to break the tension. Instead, she stared at me as if I'd just declared I planned to sprout a second head.

I let the joke die a quiet death and nodded at the split skin along her temple. "We should get that cleaned up while we talk."

"I'm fine." She said it too fast, the kind of fast that meant the opposite. "I heal quickly."

"You're not fine. And you're an Omega, in case you've forgotten. Whatever gift you're using to heal is fighting against the wolfsbane still crawling through your veins." I stepped closer, closing the gap until she had to tilt her head back to meet my gaze.

She held my gaze anyway, and in her eyes was a promise: push her any further, and pain would be waiting for me.

Still, I pressed on.

I slipped an arm around her before she could protest again and carried her the rest of the way, ignoring the rigid defiance in every line of her body, not stopping until we reached the infirmary.

The wing was grand, like every inch of my uncle's estate: high ceilings, spotless white walls, healers gliding between cots with practiced grace. As we crossed the threshold, heads turned, and I watched recognition dawn across their faces in slow, inevitable waves. First me. Then her.

Then the room went very still.

I caught scraps of it, whispered just loud enough to reach me.

White hair.

Killer.

An older healer, with silver threading her braid, approached with the wary grace of someone nearing a creature she did not trust.

She bowed to me. "Alpha Lysander. Are you injured?"

"Clearly not," I said. "She is."

The woman's gaze landed on Bonnie and lingered, and whatever she saw there made Bonnie edge half a step behind my shoulder, using me as a shield. That small movement spoke louder than any confession.

"So you're here because of her," the healer said. "The killer."

"She is not the killer."

My words came out flatter and colder than I meant, and the healer's eyes flicked to mine, measuring how far she could press before it cost her dearly.

"Please," I said, "do not be disrespectful."

She bowed her head again, quick and shallow. "My apologies, Alpha Lysander. I am simply not equipped to handle injuries of that nature. Forgive me."

She turned and walked away, unhurried, leaving behind the unmistakable message that this was never about equipment, but about whose blood she was being asked to clean.

"Is that insubordination?" I said, loud enough to carry.

She stopped. Turned back around, expression smooth again, practiced. "Of course not, Alpha Lysander. I simply do not wish to cause the girl further harm." Her eyes cut sideways, briefly, toward Bonnie. "But if the Alpha insists."

She snapped her fingers at a younger healer working a few cots down, an Omega, by the soft deference in her posture, and I watched the box of supplies pass hand to hand until it reached me.

"I would have to comply," the older healer said, voice smooth as glass, and beneath the words I caught the thin, unmistakable thread of a threat, the kind wrapped so carefully in courtesy that no one could call it what it was.

I didn't blame her, not really. My uncle had been loved. Genuinely loved, by people who had known him for decades, who had no framework yet for understanding why his murderer was standing in their infirmary being protected by his own nephew and for those who now knew, his named heir. This was going to be difficult in ways I hadn't fully accounted for yet.

I intercepted the kit before the girl reached us, waved her off with a nod, and steered Bonnie to an empty cot near the far wall, out of the worst of the staring.

She sat when I told her, but every muscle in her body still radiated resistance. I crouched in front of her and opened the kit.

Her eyes never touched me. Instead, they swept the room, tracking every healer, every patient who had stopped what they were doing to watch us.

"Are you afraid?" I asked, soaking a cloth in antiseptic.

"They're looking at me like they want to tear me apart," she said, voice low enough that only I would catch it. "Am I not allowed to be afraid?"

"You're allowed."

"Nothing is scarier than a room full of people who have already decided who you are." She winced as I pressed the cloth to her temple, her body going rigid before she forced herself to relax. "A hivemind is worse than any enemy. At least you can reason with one person."

I worked in silence, carefully wiping away the dried blood, watching her jaw clench each time the cloth found a spot still raw.

"You know my name," I said eventually. "I don't know yours."

"I don't particularly care to tell you."

I clicked my tongue.

"That doesn't seem fair."

Her brow lifted.

"Fair?"

"You've been calling me Lysander."

"I don't see the problem."

"I know your face, your crimes, your stubbornness, and approximately how many times you'll argue before doing what I ask." I folded the bloodied cloth over to a clean side.

"You know my name. All I have is 'girl who is far too stubborn for her own good.'"

"I wasn't aware we were trying to become friends."

"We're not."

"Then it doesn't matter."

"It matters to me."

She finally turned her head enough to meet my eyes, suspicion written plainly across her face.

"Why?"

"Because I'd rather not keep referring to you as 'her.'"

She held my gaze for another second before looking away again.

"I still don't care."

I sighed.

"Fine."

She frowned slightly.

"Fine?"

"I'll ask around."

Her head snapped back toward me.

"You wouldn't."

"I would."

A glare settled over her face, sharp enough to strip bark off a tree.

"I'll find someone who knew you."

"There isn't anyone."

"Someone always knows something."

Her silence was answer enough that I'd struck closer than she'd wanted.

I dabbed another cut.

"You worked as a male retainer."

She stiffened.

"So?"

"So what name did you use?" I asked. "Your own, or a man's?"

"..."

"If it was a man's name, which one?"

She studied me with narrowed eyes, clearly weighing how much refusing to answer would actually protect her.

"Bonner."

I let out a short laugh despite myself. "Okay. And... what about the real one?"

Her mouth flattened into a thin line, and for a moment I thought she would refuse, guarding her name as fiercely as she had guarded everything else for years. But the room kept watching, kept whispering, and in the end, it was easier to surrender something small than to keep sitting in that heavy silence.

"Bonnie," she said finally, quiet enough that it nearly got lost under the noise of the infirmary around us.

I studied her for a long moment, turning the name over in my mind, trying to match it to the woman before me instead of the mask she had worn for years.

"Bonnie," I echoed, and somehow, saying it out loud settled a fragment of the past day's chaos, small and strange and entirely unwelcome with everything else teetering on the brink.

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

To heal a Rogue #Chapter 23: Scent - Read To heal a Rogue Chapter 23: Scent

BONNIE

The longer I sat there, the stronger his scent became, or maybe I was just too tired to resist it anymore. Each time he leaned in to press the cloth to my temple, that heavy honeyed heat washed over me, muddling my thoughts until I felt almost intoxicated. My body ached to give in, but my mind fought back, desperate not to surrender.

Then he had the nerve to flash that easy, careless smile at me, as if tending my wounds in a room full of people who wanted me dead was just another way to pass the time.

It turned my stomach, the way too much sugar does when you swallow it all at once—sweetness curdling into nausea.

I craved his rejection more than I craved the healing of my wound, more than I craved air itself. Staying bound to him meant chaining myself to everything I'd spent so many years fleeing. He was Lily of the Valley—his pack, his people, the same earth that had devoured my mother and forced me to construct a counterfeit life, brick by brick, just to outlast the ruins of the real one.

I had made my uneasy peace with that loss, shaping my whole existence so I'd never have to look it in the eye again.

So why would the goddess twist my fate like this? I'd never been devout, never bowed

at a shrine or murmured a prayer to Selene, because what had she ever given me except the system that killed my mother? What right did she have to reach into my life now and tie me to a mate from the very bloodline I'd spent years dodging?

Lysander finished with the bandage, pressing it flat against my temple and sealing the edge with careful fingers. "There we go," he said, like he'd just finished a minor chore.

"Now what?" I said.

"Perhaps we should find somewhere else to talk."

"This place is fine."

"You said you didn't feel safe." His eyes flicked toward the healers still not-quite-staring from a few cots away. "I'd rather have this particular conversation somewhere without ears."

I glanced around. He was right. Every healer nearby had suddenly discovered an urgent task, each one conveniently close enough to catch every word we said.

"Fine," I said.

On the way out, he asked if I was hungry, and I almost laughed in his face. "Can you please just get to the point and say what you actually mean?"

He guided me into a lounge hidden off the main corridor and closed the door behind us. The silence that settled was thick, suddenly weighty now that there was no audience to hide behind.

"I have something to say too," I told him, "but you can go first."

He nodded, slow and deliberate, his posture shifting as if he were bracing himself for impact before he spoke.

"By evening," he said, "Alphas and Lunas from several packs will be arriving to grieve my uncle. I've already pushed for your release, because I know you had nothing to do with what happened to him." He paused. "But the Elder Circle wants a fall guy. They want it to be you."

A laugh clawed its way out of me, low and humorless. "I'm not surprised." I finally looked at him, really looked—at the fresh bandage, at the careful kindness he'd shown since dragging me out of that cell. "Is that why you've been so nice? Softening me up before you drop the axe?"

"No."

"Bullshit." The word cut sharper than I intended, but I couldn't hold it back. "This is what you people do best. Smile, patch someone up, let them believe they're safe, and then toss them aside the moment it suits your politics."

"Please stop saying that." Something in his voice cracked slightly, more raw than I expected. "You're part of this pack too, whether you want to be or not."

"No, I'm not." My voice climbed, betraying me. "I don't believe in any of this. Not the goddess, not the bond, not the pack that decided a terrified nine-year-old deserved to watch her mother bleed out on a cell floor because of her hair color or some miracle

she did." My hands shook, and I despised the weakness. "Forget all that. I did. But I now have my life mapped out. A tiny house. Neighbors who wouldn't know a designation if it bit them. No politics, no thrones, no packs deciding who lives and who gets thrown to the wolves for show." My throat closed around the words. "If I'd just kept my head down that night. If I'd just walked past instead of opening that damned door—"

I felt myself splintering, tears burning behind my eyes, hot and humiliating. He reached out, touching my arm with a gentleness that only made it worse.

It didn't.

I yanked his hand away so quickly it almost wrenched my own wrist. "Do not touch me."

He didn't flinch or recoil. He just watched me, his face set in an expression I couldn't quite name—equal parts patience and unyielding resolve.

"I don't intend to let that happen to you," he said quietly.

"Let what happen?"

"Whatever they're planning." His jaw tightened. "I'll make sure I'm announced as heir apparent in front of everyone first, before anything else gets decided. And the moment they try to bring your punishment up in front of the visiting court, I'll call them out publicly. In front of every Alpha and Luna in that room."

I stared at him.

"Why would you even consider that?" My voice rose, out of my control. "Do you realize what you're risking? You'd be standing before every pack leader here, tearing down your own Elder Circle before you've even claimed the throne."

"To save you," he said, like it was the simplest thing in the world. "Of course."

"So your answer," I said, "is to throw me under an even brighter spotlight? More eyes, more danger? Do you even grasp what they would be planning for me, after that? Do you really believe making enemies of your own allies and crowners is smart?"

"I do not care. I simply intend to stop the punishment before it happens."

"Yeah! By starting a political war," I said, "on day one. Your first order of business as heir apparent is to publicly defy the Elder Circle, the same circle that just confirmed your claim to the throne this morning, I am sure." I shook my head, disbelief crawling up my spine. "That is insane. That is not protection, Alpha Lysander. Neither is it salvation."

"What would you have me do? They want to enact some old law! Brand you the royal house breeder in front of all of them?!"

I stared at him, something ugly and desperate rising in my chest.

"What is so bad about that?" I said. "It spares my life. It gives them exactly what they want. A fucking spectacle, sure, but at least I'm still breathing at the end of it." I let my eyes cut into his. "And you don't intend to let me go anyway. So what's actually the difference?"

He opened his mouth, but I wasn't finished.

"Oh," I said, and something bitter climbed up my throat along with the word. "It's

humiliating because I'm your mate. That's it, isn't it? That's the whole reason for any of this. You believing me. You saving me. You deciding you're bigger than your own Elder Circle, willing to burn political capital on day one just to protect me." I shook my head slowly. "It's because I'm your mate. That's the only reason any of this matters to you."

"Why is that so wrong?" he said.

"Because if I wasn't," I said, "I'd already be dead. Prince Johann wanted me dead the second he walked into that library. You'd have let it happen. You wouldn't have even blinked."

"No," he said, low and certain. "I wouldn't have. I'm not that kind of man."

"You are."

"You sound so sure of that." Something flickered across his face, almost amused, almost hurt. "Like you actually know me."

"I do."

He didn't argue that. He just let it sit there between us, and I hated that he didn't argue it, because some small traitorous part of me knew what I'd said might not have even been true.

"So you'd be fine," he said instead, "being humiliated like that. In front of every visiting Alpha and Luna in this territory."

"No," I said. "But it spares my life. That's more than I can say for most of the options I've had since I opened that door last night." I crossed my arms, needing something to hold onto that wasn't him. "If you want to save me so badly, there's an easier way. Let me go. Reject me. I can run. I can disappear the way I've disappeared before. I'm good at it. I've had many years of practice."

"Is there a reason," he said slowly, "you hate the bond so much?"

I didn't answer right away.

"The goddess doesn't hand these out at random," he continued, watching me carefully, like he was trying to read something buried under my skin. "It's rare. Rarer than most people understand. She doesn't waste it."

"Fuck the goddess! I have been in hell because of her! And she does not intend to stop anytime soon."

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

To heal a Rogue #Chapter 24: The first seed - Read To heal a Rogue Chapter 24: The first seed

EDELINA

The phone's warmth lingered in my palm as Johann's voice cut through again, sharper now, nothing like the boy who once wept at his father's thunder across the dinner table.

"What do you even want to use the bite for, Mother?" he said. "You want to give two rogue lowlifes the power to turn people into what we supposedly are, and you do not

think you should explain why?"

I pressed the phone harder to my ear and stared at the window, the bleak afternoon light spilling in, useless against the ache burning behind my eyes.

"Because they see themselves in us," I said.

He went quiet for a beat too long. That silence always meant he was shaping something in his mind before letting me hear its edges.

"Even in their own so-called blessing," I said slowly, "there's a caste system. Lowborns who never shift. No wolf. No power in their veins beyond whatever scraps get handed down. And our curse, twisted as it is, could look like salvation to men and women like that. It is salvation."

"A way to break something that was never going to bend for them otherwise." He chipped in.

I let a small, tired smile pull at my mouth even though he couldn't see it.

"Precisely," I said. "You always did understand people faster than your father ever did."

"Don't," he said. "Not right now."

I let it slide. Grief always made sons sharper with their mothers. I remembered that lesson from my own life, though memories of my own mother had worn thin, eroded by years and things harsher than grief.

"Then they'd better be ready to die for it," Johann said, and something in his voice had gone flat and cold in a way that made me sit up straighter against my pillows. "Before you hand either of them anything permanent, they need to finish what they started."

"They will. Sacrifice was always necessary for this. You were intended to be the one who would hunt them down for their heads, strengthening yourself when you climbed the throne."

He ignored that entirely.

"The girl," he said. "The one who saw them. She told the room one of them has a scar. Corner of the mouth to the ear. That's going to be our eventual fall guy, whichever of them it is. But before we get there, I need them to do something first. I need to spread a little poison of my own."

I sat forward, the blanket sliding off my shoulder, my curiosity sharpening past the exhaustion sitting in my bones.

"What do you have in mind?"

"The scar rogue has to come back," he said. "His new objective would be pretending to save her. The rogue." He exhaled, and I could hear him pacing somewhere, his footsteps hitting some hard floor with a rhythm I recognized from when he was a boy working himself into an idea. "I make sure he is caught doing it. Caught trying to help her, or caught close enough to her that it looks like they are accomplices indeed. And then I sell it. Fully. That cousin has thrown support behind my father's killer."

"Johann—"

"Let me finish." His voice cracked through the line with an edge that silenced me, the way his father's used to, the way I'd never expected to hear from my own son this soon. "Lysander is going to be announced formally this evening. Heir apparent, in front of every visiting Alpha and Luna who's crawled into this estate to gawk at Father's corpse. What better way to plant the first seed that he can't be trusted to lead than to make sure he's seen opposing his own Elder Circle? Taking the side of the woman who murdered his uncle?" A pause settled, and I could hear the satisfaction settle into it, thick and quiet. "Given how unnatural Father's death already looks, a beautiful story writes itself. Grief-stricken cousin, blinded by a mate bond, defying the very elders who crowned him. And I get painted in a much better light for whatever comes after. For the coup that has to happen eventually."

I sat with his words for a long moment, turning them over as I did with anything anyone gave me, searching for the soft spots, the places that might break under real weight.

"I never doubted you, my boy," I said finally, and I meant every word of it, even through the tightness climbing up my throat. "You will have it. Whatever you need from me."

"Good," he said, and then, after a beat that felt almost careless, almost like an afterthought, "also. Your false family. The ones that sold the story that you were a werewolf. Can they be here as well? In case I need strong political figures to stoke things along when evening comes, and everything goes according to plan?"

"I don't see why not," I said.

"Hmmm... That will be all then."

He didn't say goodbye. He never did anymore. The line simply went dead in my hand, the small click of it landing somewhere under my ribs like something falling out of a high shelf.

I sat there for a moment with the phone still against my ear, listening to nothing, and then I lowered it into my lap and scrolled through my contacts with a thumb that trembled more than it used to.

I found the one marked Father.

I pressed it and listened to it ring. Once. Twice. Three times. Four. It kept ringing in that hollow, patient way that told me exactly what was coming before it came, and then his voicemail picked up, his recorded voice as smooth and unbothered.

"Hey, it's Sterling. Leave a message after the beep."

I ended the call before the beep. I did not have it in me to leave a message. Especially not in trying times like these.

I called again anyway.

It rang the same four times. It went to the same recording. I hung up before his voice could finish telling me he wasn't available, because I already knew that better than anyone.

Something thick and sudden clawed up my throat, the cough building before I could stop it, that awful tightening now as familiar as breath. My fingers fumbled for the

tissue box, but my reflexes were too slow, and I barely pressed one to my mouth before the cough ripped out, deep and wet and ugly.

When I pulled the tissue away, there was blood on it. Dark and thick, spread across the white in a pattern I'd stopped being surprised by months ago, though it never once stopped disgusting me.

I stared at it for a moment, then let out a long, slow sigh and let my head sink back into the pillow.

It made me think of Cornelius. For some strange reason, he was at the back of my mind.

"It didn't have to end like this, Conny," I said to the empty room, my voice barely above a whisper, meant for no one but myself and whatever remained of a man whom I used to at least pretend to love.

I tossed the tissue into the bin beside the bed and closed my eyes.

A soft knock landed against the door a moment later, careful and deferential, and I opened my eyes to find one of the healers standing just inside the frame, her hands folded in front of her in that posture they all learned before they were allowed anywhere near royal quarters.

"Luna Edelina," she said. "Someone is here to see you."

"Who?" I said, not bothering to lift my head from the pillow.

"He says his name is Alpha Sterling."

A cold, familiar weight settled in my chest, and I let out a breath through my nose that nearly became a laugh.

"Speak of the devil," I said under my breath.

The healer blinked at me, unsure whether she'd heard correctly, unsure whether she was meant to respond to that at all.

I pushed myself upright against the pillows, ignoring the ache slicing through my ribs, and let a slow, deliberate smile spread across my face—the kind I had not practiced in decades, because some expressions simply lived in the blood.

"He's my father," I said. "Call him in."

The healer's eyes widened slightly, some new understanding rearranging itself behind them, and she bowed low and quick.

"Of course, Luna Edelina," she said, and then she was gone, her footsteps fading quickly down the corridor, leaving me alone with the metallic taste of blood lingering at the back of my throat as I prepared for Sterling's unavoidable explosion.

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

To heal a Rogue #Chapter 25: Allied - Read To heal a Rogue Chapter 25: Allied

EDELINA

Sterling filled the doorway as if he owned the very air, broad and unhurried, carrying himself like the room should thank him for his presence. The healer slipped past, bowing low and whispering about leaving us alone, and then the door clicked shut, sealing us in with nothing but the sharp tang of antiseptic and the stale scent of old fear.

His gaze swept the room before it ever found me, as if the walls themselves might offer answers I could not.

"What happened to the great infirmary?" he said. "I heard through the grapevine you were tucked away here in some backwater hospice. If I'm being generous and calling it civilization at all." He shook his head slowly, taking in the plain walls, the single monitor, the absence of anything that looked like it belonged to royalty. "I could not believe my ears. And then your husband dies." He spread his hands. "What in the goddess's name is happening, Edelina?"

"As you can see," I said, "my curse is progressing rapidly."

"That did not answer a single one of my questions."

I held his gaze for a long, unbroken moment. There was never a gentle way into these things, and I had never wasted time pretending otherwise.

"Sterling," I said. "Cornelius found out I'm a Lycan."

His eyes flew wide, so theatrically I nearly laughed, if not for the cold dread lurking beneath it all.

"What the fuck," he said. "Why would you not tell me that immediately? Do you understand what that implicates for me?"

"Calm down."

"Do not tell me to calm down."

"If he wanted you dead," I said, keeping my voice level even as his rose, "he had weeks to do it." I let that settle before I gave him the rest of it. "And he didn't. So maybe he forgave you."

Sterling stared at me as if I had suddenly started speaking in a tongue he could not hope to understand.

"Goddess," he said. "In what world does a werewolf, especially an Alpha King, forgive and forget something like that?"

"Does it matter?" I said. "He's dead now."

Something flickered behind his eyes, quick and razor-sharp, the instinctive calculation of a man who had survived by reading danger before it ever announced itself.

"You did it," he said. "Didn't you?"

"Are you asking me questions you already have the answers to?"

He let out a long, slow breath through his nose and sank into the chair beside my bed, claiming the space without waiting for permission.

"What is the game plan, Edelina?"

"I was tired." The words came out simpler than I expected them to, worn thin from repeating them to myself in the dark for weeks. "I could have played the long game. I have played long games my entire life, Sterling, you know that better than most men alive. But Conny found out, and once he found out, it was only ever a matter of time before the whole thing came apart at the seams." I looked down at my hands, at the faint tremor that lived in them now permanently. "I'm dying. You know that. And Johann is going to start feeling the pull of the curse soon enough. You know the males suffer worse than we women do, and faster." I looked up and met his eyes squarely. "I am so close, Sterling. Closer than any of my bloodline has come in generations. I will not start over. I refuse."

"So, keep looking at me like an ally," I said before he could argue, "instead of looking at me like I'm something to be afraid of. You should be rejoicing with me right now."

"I cannot rejoice." His jaw worked, the muscle in it flexing hard enough that I could see it from where I sat. "If Cornelius knew what you were three weeks before you did what you did, why wouldn't he have arrested me? Confronted me, even once for pretending that you were my daughter? There was nothing. Not a single word to my face in all that time or consequence."

"He could have exposed me," I said. "I was a Lycan wearing a Luna's crown for many years. He could have killed me right there in that infirmary the moment his healers confirmed it. Ended his own hybrid son's life along with mine." I felt something bitter climb up the back of my throat, old and familiar. "Instead he shipped me here to die quietly, where no one important would ask questions. Told our son nothing until I had to sit him down myself and spill every last secret I've been carrying since before he was born." I paused, watching Sterling's face. "Do you know why, Sterling?"

"Why?" he said, though it came out flat, like he already suspected the shape of my answer and hated it in advance.

"Because of his own bigotry," I said. "His own pride. How exactly was he supposed to acknowledge that Lycans beat him? That after being hunted and forgotten for a thousand years, we finally crawled our way into the highest werewolf seat in this territory and sat there smiling at his side for three decades? That I even gave him a son, a real heir, and he never once suspected a thing until his own healers dragged it out of my blood?" My voice had climbed without my permission, and I let it. "So he settled for the next best thing available to a proud old man. Erasure. Quiet, tidy erasure, dressed up as mercy."

"You're acting on assumption," Sterling said. "That's all this is. Guesswork dressed up as certainty. He has a Beta! Do you know what a Beta is to their Alpha?"

"Who gives a shit?" I said. "His Beta is currently out of the country."

"That does not mean he did not know." Sterling leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and something genuinely afraid moved across his face for the first time since he'd walked through that door. "The one thing worse than a Lycan sitting on a werewolf throne, Edeline, is a werewolf found allied with one. If word of that gets out before we control the narrative, they will not simply kill me. They will make an example that

echoes through every pack in this territory for a fucking hundred years."

"Sterling," I said, softer now, "you are safe. As long as you keep standing at my son's side moving forward, you will continue to have everything you've ever wanted from this arrangement."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means you should leave here as soon as possible," I said, "so you make it back to the castle in time to grieve properly alongside my son. He is going to need you standing next to him tonight, in front of every visiting Alpha and Luna who's crawled in to grieve as well. And the play he's about to direct is going to be worth watching unfold."

"Do not speak to me in riddles, Edelina. Not today."

I sighed, and a deep weariness settled in my chest, curling up beside the ache that had become my constant companion.

"He will need you there because there is one thing I did not anticipate," I said, "before I had Cornelius killed."

His eyes sharpened, every trace of the earlier fear folding itself into pure, focused attention.

"What?" he asked.

I let the silence spool out, heavy and inevitable, letting it settle between us the way I always did before surrendering something that mattered.

"He changed his heir," I said. "Named his nephew instead. Lysander." I watched the name land on Sterling's face, watched him work through everything it meant before I finished it for him. "The son of that bastard Wenzel."

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