

To heal a Rogue

c 26-30

LYSANDER

The phone in my pocket was ringing even when she had gone quiet in a way I didn't like.

This was not like the guarded quiet from the stairwell, where she'd shut the bond down like a door slamming on my fingers. This was different. She now sat on the edge of the settee in the lounge with her hands folded in her lap, staring at some fixed point on the wall that wasn't actually there, and something about the stillness of her made the hair on my arms rise.

"You clearly seem to hate this," I said. "And the way it seems... it cannot just be the bond. I understand you hate the situation, given how it happened and the predicament you are now in. But this is frankly starting to feel like something else."

She didn't answer right away. Her jaw worked once, twice, like she was chewing on whether the truth was worth the cost of saying it.

"There's something your uncle wanted to tell you," she said finally, ignoring the conversation that I was trying to make and focusing on something else entirely. "Before he died."

I went still.

"What?"

"But I'm not telling you." She looked up at me then, and there was nothing soft in her eyes at all. "Not until you break the bond."

I laughed, short and humorless, disbelief crawling up my throat before I could stop it. "You're lying."

"Believe what you want but you can tell. There is this sick connection between us now. There is not much I can hide from you if I am not shielding."

I reached for the bond without meaning to, the way I'd done in the stairwell, some instinct in me needing to check her words against whatever truth lived underneath them. It came back clean and sharp, with no static or deception threading through it anywhere. She meant every word. She actually knew something, and she was actually willing to sit on it like a weapon rather than hand it to me for free.

"You're not lying," I said, quieter now.

"No."

"Then tell me."

"Like I said, break the bond first."

I stared at her, and something in my chest tightened at the sheer audacity of it, at the way she sat there with her spine straight and her chin up like she hadn't spent the last hour bleeding through wolfsbane rope three floors below and would still be there suffering if I hadn't offered a hand.

But two could play that game.

"No," I said.

"Then I guess you'll never know."

"Bonnie."

"Don't."

I let the silence hold for a moment, testing whether either of us would break first. Neither of us did.

"Can I shower?" she said instead, the demand in her voice gone, replaced with something more tired as she changed the topic a second time. Ahw was trying to act like she wasn't bothered that her drop in the bucket failed spectacularly. "I feel like I have half of that cell still on my skin."

I was curious. But not that curious. Uncle has already revealed plenty. Surely he would not have had something even dire that he kept away from me until it was too late.

My phone rang again and given the rapid succession that it was coming in, it could only be one person.

I cleared my throat before I spoke.

"I don't trust any werewolf in this estate around you right now," I said. "Not after what just happened in that infirmary. Not after what that sentinel did to you with his rifle. I'm not leaving you with someone who might decide their hate and grief should overshadow common sense."

Her eyes narrowed at that, sharp enough to cut. "I don't need to be watched like I'll run the second no one's looking. I don't need an Omega or Sentinel standing by. I just need some privacy."

"I didn't say that."

"You implied it." She stood, and even exhausted, even bruised, she carried herself like she refused to let the room see her waver. "If you trust me at all, even a little, give me the chance to prove it. I'm not asking you to leave the estate. I'm asking you to leave a room so I can clean up."

I looked at her for a long moment. Something about the way she said it, flat and unflinching, cut through whatever argument I'd been building.

"Fine," I said.

Something in her shoulders eased, just barely, just enough for me to notice.

"Well... this is a guest room," I said, nodding toward the door behind her. "You can use that bathroom and there should be plain clothes in the wardrobe. I'll be right outside."

She nodded once, short and stiff, and didn't thank me. I hadn't expected her to.

I stepped out into the corridor and pulled the door shut behind me, and the moment the latch clicked, my phone buzzed hard against my hip.

I already knew who it was before I looked. Only one person called this many times in a single morning without waiting for a response.

"For the love of the goddess," I muttered, and answered.

"What the fuck happened?" Sofiane's voice came through before I'd even gotten the phone properly to my ear. "I've been calling for an hour."

"I know it is insane," I said, rubbing a hand over my face. "But I am sure you would have heard it all already. Uncle was murdered."

"That is not what the fuck I'm talking about." He then paused. "That is tragic of course and everyone is agitated about it. But—"

I stopped in the middle of the corridor. "Then what are you talking about?"

"I just got a call," Sofiane said, "from our dear cousin. Johann. Telling me the whole Asker family should show up tonight because apparently you're about to be crowned King and you said nothing!"

I went very still.

"He called you?"

"He called me," Sofiane said, "sounding entirely too pleasant about the whole thing, considering his own father is barely cold and he isn't even being considered for the seat. Said something about wanting the family properly represented for such a historic occasion." A pause. "I didn't even know you were being crowned anything, Lysander. I am your brother and I had to hear it from him."

I leaned my shoulder against the wall, my mind already turning the information over, looking for the angle Johann had buried inside it.

"He's up to something," I said, mostly to myself.

"No shit," Sofiane said. "He must be pissed to death that the elders picked you."

I closed my eyes for a second, picturing Johann's face red as a beet.

"The elders did not pick me. Uncle did, before he died."

That seemed to surprise Sofiane even more. "What the fuck? Why? Also who will take over Lily of the Valley?"

I couldn't tell if he was excited at the idea that the responsibility would fall on him or horrified. With Sofiane. You could never tell. But I half-wanted to come clean.

I was not really interested in the Alpha King seat after all. I only did this to save her and of course, bring the real criminals to light.

Plus, it was not really fair to throw Sofiane into a position that was now empty because of my selfishness and obsession.

So I settled for the safe answer instead. Once evening had come and pass, I would know where to go with this next.

"Sofiane, I'll talk you later. Something came up."

Before he could even argue about it, I ended the call.

Once that was done, I felt the bond shut off.

My immediate reaction happened before I could even think.

My hand grabbed at the door and I was about to tear it open and look for her.

It was international after all. But the second my hand touched the handle, I paused.

Because... This felt like a test. She had pushed that I trusted her and here I was doubting her. It was possible I was overthinking and she had not already found a way to pry the window of the bathroom open and was now trying to find a way out.

I had to trust her.

To heal a Rogue

BONNIE

The door clicked shut behind him. I held my breath and counted to ten, every second stretching tight before I finally let myself move.

I darted over and pressed my ear to the wood. His voice filtered through, muffled but unwavering, locked in some argument—family, politics, it hardly mattered. All that mattered was he was distracted, and distraction meant distance, and distance was the only currency I had left.

Before the thought had even finished forming, my mind leaped to the window.

I could see it already: strip the sheets, tear the curtains, twist them into a makeshift rope strong enough to carry me down. I'd escaped worse with less—climbed out of tighter corners with nothing but a torn shirt and a desperate hope. This room was practically generous, with a real bed frame, real fabric, and a window that actually opened instead of one sealed shut for show.

Then the bond shifted—subtle but undeniable—a thread of him brushing against my emotions. I crushed the surge of excitement so fiercely my jaw throbbed.

Stupid. If he sensed that flash of hope, that jolt of a plan snapping into place, he'd burst through the door before I even touched the sheets. I forced my breath to slow, pressed the thrill down until it was dull and harmless, and only then did I step away from the door.

I caught my reflection in the mirror across the room and froze.

Blood. Dried along my hairline, smudged faint at the corner of my jaw, the leftover evidence of a rifle butt and a cell floor and every ugly thing that had happened to me since I opened that lounge door last night. That wasn't going to work. The moment anyone saw me looking like that, there would be questions, and questions were the one thing I couldn't currently afford, not with an escape plan sitting half-formed in my skull.

Clean up first. Plan after.

I slipped into the bathroom and turned the tap to cold, splashing my face until the water ran pink, then clear, until my skin burned and the taste of copper filled my mouth from a

bitten lip I hadn't even noticed. In the smaller mirror above the sink, I stared at myself, and a wave of exhaustion and fury surged up all at once.

"Why me?" I said, quiet, to no one.

I meant it for the goddess. Selene. The woman in the moon who supposedly watched over every wolf born under her light and had never once, not a single time in my entire miserable life, bothered answering a single prayer I'd thrown her way. I wasn't even sure I believed in her most days. But I was fairly certain she tuned in for the drama regardless, whether she answered or not, the way people slowed down to watch a car wreck they had no intention of helping with.

"I just want to know the grand scheme," I said, louder this time, my reflection glaring back at me with blood still drying at the edge of her jaw. "What's the big plan here? Because from where I'm standing, it looks like you just enjoy watching me suffer."

Nothing answered. Nothing ever did.

"Forget it," I muttered. "I'll overcome this too."

I stripped out of the uniform first, then peeled the binder off, wincing at the raw lines it had cut into skin that hadn't had a proper break from it in longer than I wanted to think about, and stepped into the shower before the water had even fully warmed.

I kept my head tilted, careful of the wound at my temple, and watched the dried blood bloom dark and wet before sliding down the drain in thin, rust-colored streams. I stood there, just breathing, letting the water do its work, then glanced down at my hand.

It happened slowly at first. A flicker, faint blue, then brighter, until my palm glowed with that same brilliant, familiar light I'd spent years trying to bury under dress-up and denial. I lifted it to my temple, careful, and pressed it against the covered wound, and felt the hum move through my skull, knitting something back together that a rifle butt had broken open hours ago.

The light faded. The ache went with it.

I stepped out and dried off in a rush, and that was when the fear returned in full force, crashing over me the way it always did once my hands had nothing left to do but shake.

He'd already told me what tonight would look like. The old law. The breeder title. Some ceremony dressed up in false mercy in front of every visiting Alpha and Luna crawling through this estate to gawk at a dead king. I'd begged him to just let me take the punishment quietly, to let it happen and be done with it, and he'd refused, standing there in that lounge like his own stubbornness was some kind of gift he was handing me.

He was headstrong. Anyone could see it. And headstrong men made bold promises about defying elders and then actually tried to keep them. If he tried that tonight, with so many watching, there was no telling what it might cost either of us. Well... mostly me.

I went to the window and opened it again.

The drop was steep. Steeper than I liked. But I'd worked with worse, and adding clothes would ensure that I had a serviceable rope, especially if one tied them right. I only needed to be quick about it.

I hurried to the door and pressed my ear against it again. He was still talking, voice low and tense, still distracted. I locked the door as quietly as I could and let out a slow, careful breath.

Then I did something reckless, but calculated. I lowered the shield around the bond, just halfway, deliberately sloppy, leaving enough of myself exposed that he could sense me if he tried. Let him think I was just getting dressed. Let him feel nothing but the ordinary static of someone moving about a room.

I threw on the cleanest shirt I could find and tore into the rest—the curtains, an extra blanket—ripping the fabric into long strips and twisting them together with hands that moved faster than my thoughts. I kept darting glances at the door, terrified he'd hear the tearing and figure it out before I finished.

I knotted one end to the bed frame, tested it with my full weight, then fed the rest out the window until it dangled against the stone below.

I then shut the bond down completely.

I climbed halfway onto the sill, cold air hitting my bare arms, the ground far enough below that my stomach dropped just looking at it, and I had every intention of going through with it.

Then my own voice came back to haunt me, clear as anything.

If you trust me at all, even a little, give me the chance to prove it.

I cursed under my breath, sharp and furious, because of course that was what stopped me. Not the fear of falling. Not the fear of being caught. My own stupid words, echoing back at the worst possible moment, heavy in my chest like a stone I couldn't swallow.

Why did I owe men like him anything? Why did keeping my word to Lily of the Valley royalty matter at all, when everything I'd learned told me it shouldn't?

I couldn't make myself finish it anyway.

I turned toward the door, half-expecting it to be rattling under his fist, convinced he'd sensed the shift the instant I dropped the bond. But there was nothing. No pounding. No voice through the wood. Just silence, which meant he hadn't come running the moment he lost me, which meant, somehow, impossibly, he trusted me enough to let me be.

I yanked the makeshift rope back through the window, coiled it quickly, and stuffed the tangled mess into the bottom dresser drawer, out of sight. My hands still shook from how close I'd come.

Then I crossed the room, unlocked the door, and pulled it open.

"I'm done," I said.

To heal a Rogue

EDELINA

Sterling sat back in the chair like the words had physically struck him.

"What the fuck," he said, low and drawn out, dragging a hand down his face. "That is the ultimate fuck you. Naming Wenzel's boy over his own blood." He stared at me, and I watched him work through it, watched the pieces assemble themselves behind his eyes the way they always did with him, quick and mercenary. "So what do you plan to do now? Usurp him?"

"Of course," I said. "What else is there to do?"

"I cannot stand behind you if that's the plan, Edelina."

I felt something cold settle into my chest, colder than the fever that had been living there for weeks now.

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"There were benefits to standing behind you." He said it carefully, like a man picking his way across ice he already suspected was thin. "Quiet benefits. Discreet ones. But if you intend to start a war, a real one, over your own agenda, I cannot be part of that." His jaw tightened. "I am still a proud werewolf, Edelina. If a Lycan sits at the head of werewolf society after taking it through violence and given the exposure of what the Alpha King knew and even some of his servants, we are all finished. Every pack, every bloodline, everything we've built as a society for a thousand years, undone because of what you are and what you want."

"What I want?" I repeated, and something in my voice must have carried more than I intended, because he flinched.

Still, something about the look in his face said that he was not going to back down.

"You are a Lycan through and through," he said. "Your goals are the only thing that has ever mattered to you. I understand that. I have understood that since the day I met you. But there is a difference between helping a woman keep a secret and helping her burn down a kingdom. A kingdom my blood and myself have been part of for generations."

I reached out and grabbed his hand before he could pull it back, my grip was tighter than my current strength should have allowed, and I watched something flicker across his face when he felt it.

"What the fuck does that mean?" I said again, quieter now, which made it worse. "A proud werewolf? Sterling, your pack was going to fall. I watched it happen in real time. The caste system affects everyone. Even fucking Alphas. Even packs has a ranking system and you were falling from the top 100 fast. You knew what that mean. That shit was eating your bloodline alive long before I ever came near you." I held his eyes, unblinking. "You are not Lily of the Valley. You are certainly not Skollrend. You had no crest worth kneeling for and no coffers deep enough to keep your own people fed through a bad year. If my dirty Lycan money hadn't pulled your pack through, you would have fallen to penury in less than a decade. Every scrap of privilege you enjoy now, every ounce of respect that gets paid to your name in rooms you used to be laughed out of, exists because of me."

"Edelina—"

"Just because there's a setback," I said, cutting him off, "does not mean you get to abandon me now. Or abandon this cause. Not after everything I have already spent keeping you afloat."

I let my eyes change then.

I felt them go, felt the warmth bleed out of them the way it always did, black pouring in from the edges until there was nothing human left in my gaze at all, and I watched Sterling's whole body go rigid in the chair, watched him lean back like the space between us had suddenly become far too small.

"Just because I am on a sick bed," I said, my voice dropping into something low and entirely without patience, "does not mean I will tolerate this kind of disrespect from you. I will not tolerate it, Sterling. Not from you, of all people."

He swallowed hard. I let my eyes hold there a moment longer before I let them fade back into something closer to human, and the room seemed to exhale along with him.

"So," he said, his voice noticeably thinner now, "what is the plan?"

"Like I said. Keep standing by my son's side."

"Can he do it... Can we actually do it?" Sterling said. "What it takes, I mean. He might be half you, Edelina, but he is also half his father. Can he actually reconcile the fact that you killed the man who raised him? His own blood?"

"After everything Cornelius did to his own son," I said, "erasing him from a will three weeks before his death, letting him believe his entire life was building toward something that was never his to inherit, he can reconcile it fine." I let that sit a moment. "My boy needs you at the royal estate tonight, Sterling. Whatever he decides to do, whatever shape his plan takes, you hold his hand through it."

"I need to know what he's planning first."

"Do not be such a coward." The words came out sharper than I meant them, though I didn't regret them once they'd left my mouth. "You are bound to this whether you like the shape of it today or not. I still don't even know the full extent of what Cornelius put in place before he died, what traps he might have left buried in that estate for people like us. So protect us, Sterling. In doing that, you protect yourself as well."

He was quiet for a long moment, his jaw working, something bitter and resigned passing behind his eyes.

"It is not as though I have a choice," he muttered, mostly to himself, and then he stood, straightening his jacket with two sharp tugs. "I have to leave. If I'm going to make it back before the mourning rites begin."

I nodded once.

He didn't say goodbye. Men like Sterling rarely did, not when they were leaving a room they hadn't wanted to enter in the first place. He crossed to the door, paused there for half a second like he might say something else, and then thought better of it and walked out, pulling it shut behind him with more force than necessary.

I watched the door for a while after he'd gone; my chest was tight with something that wasn't quite triumph and wasn't quite dread.

Then the cough came again, hard and sudden, tearing up from somewhere deep in my chest, and I barely got a hand over my mouth before it doubled me forward against the pillows. When I pulled my hand away, there was blood on it, more than there'd been just minutes ago. This was just as dark and glistening against my palm.

I stared at it for a moment, breathing hard, and let my head fall back against the headboard.

The war was already costing me pieces of myself I could not afford to lose. I only hoped there would be enough of me left to see it through to the end.

Chapter 29: Keep your secrets

BONNIE

"Great," he said, with a half-shrug that told me he didn't think it was great at all.

"What next?" I asked, though honestly, I already knew I'd follow him anywhere he suggested. There were only so many places to hide from the day, and fewer people I trusted to hide with.

"I'm not sure." He glanced down the corridor, then back at me, something twitchy and unsettled in the set of his shoulders. "While we wait for evening to come, we should head somewhere more..." He let the thought trail off, like he'd started to say the word safe and then decided that was tempting fate. "Follow me."

I did, because what else was there to do? Standing in that guest room by myself, with nothing but the stale air and the rope in the bottom drawer for company, sounded like slow suffocation. I'd had quite enough of my own thoughts for one day. So I trailed after him, not quite side by side, but close enough that I could hear the steady rhythm of his breathing and tell by the way his hands curled and flexed that he was fighting off his own nerves.

We walked in silence for a while. His steps were even, almost measured, like he could out-stubborn the tension in the air. Mine dragged a little, still stiff from hours spent on cold cell floors and the lingering ache of wolfsbane, the kind that seeped into your bones and made you feel ancient.

He broke the silence first, still looking straight ahead. "Are you certain?" he said, his voice a notch quieter. "That you don't want me to defend you when evening comes? When they accuse you of a crime you didn't commit and brand you a breeder in front of half the visiting packs in this territory?" His jaw worked, and something flickered in his eyes I couldn't quite name. "It's an open secret caste, lower than Omegas. If that mark goes on you tonight, it could be a permanent flaw."

"Well," I said, doing my best to sound lighter than I felt, "I did want to escape earlier. But since you will not let me, I think I'm alright with just clearing my name properly." I looked straight ahead, determined not to let him see whatever was written on my face. "Once the truth comes out—once whoever actually did this is dragged into the open—my name gets cleared on its own. And maybe then you'll be kind enough to finally reject me, and we can go our separate ways like none of this ever happened."

I watched him from the corner of my eye as I spoke, searching for some flicker of agreement, some sign that he saw the sense in it. But his face stayed carefully blank, the kind of blank that meant he'd already made up his mind and wasn't going to argue about it with words. That made something twist low in my stomach—a knot of frustration and something else I didn't want to name. For a second, I hated myself for not running when I still had the rope in my hands.

I watched him from the corner of my eye when I said it, hunting for some flicker of agreement, some sign that he saw the sense in it the way I did. Instead his face stayed carefully blank, the kind of blank that told me he'd already decided that particular future wasn't going to happen and didn't feel the need to argue about it out loud. It made

something twist low in my stomach, some ugly little knot of frustration that I refused to call anything else.

I hated that I hadn't just run when I still had the rope in my hands. The thought curled in my gut, sour and sharp, and I shoved it away before it could spread any further.

"Where are we going, then?" I asked, needing a new subject—anything to keep regret from sinking its teeth in.

"It's been a long time, actually, since I've been here," he said, a faraway look flickering across his face. "But I had a suite. I believe I should still have it."

Something shifted behind his words—a flicker of guilt, maybe, or something quieter and sadder. I caught it more in the bond than in his voice, and decided to let it go. Whatever haunted him, it wasn't my place to pry it open. I did not give a damn.

"When you were talking with your uncle," I said, changing tack, "in the library. It sounded like you didn't want the throne at all. What changed your mind?"

He went silent for a few steps, eyes fixed on the hallway ahead as if the answer might be waiting for him around the next corner.

"Something is clearly going on here," he said finally. "And I intend to figure out exactly what." He hesitated, and when he spoke again, his voice was softer, like it cost him

something. "I also knew I needed the power. If I was going to have any real chance of saving you."

He stopped walking, turning to face me directly. There was a searching look in his expression—measuring, weighing—and it made my spine straighten, a pulse of alertness running through me.

"There's something I did find odd, though," he added, and his tone shifted, more analytical now.

"What?" I asked, bracing myself for whatever revelation he was about to drop. My heart thudded, and I forced myself to meet his gaze, even though some part of me already knew I wouldn't like what came next.

"You saw one of them. The attackers." His eyes locked on mine, steady and unblinking, and suddenly it felt like there was no air in the hallway. "Surely a fight would have broken out. How did you walk out of that room alive when my uncle didn't?"

I felt the shield around the bond flicker, up and then down again—a stupid, involuntary reflex I hadn't fully mastered yet. It was one of those tells I hated, as obvious as a flinch. The question hung between us, heavy as a threat.

"Sorry," I said, my voice thin. "Reflex."

He didn't move. "Why? If you have nothing to hide."

I let my hand drift up to the bandage at my temple, pressing just hard enough to fake a wince I didn't actually feel anymore. The wound had already knitted shut in the shower not an hour ago, but it was easier to play at weakness than let him look too closely anywhere else.

"My memory's mostly hazy," I lied, watching his expression for any sign he might buy it. "I did get this."

"That was a sentinel," he countered immediately. "Not the attackers."

I shrugged, trying to keep my voice even. "I also happen to be a good fighter. Maybe they wanted me alive—to frame me properly, instead of just leaving a body behind that couldn't talk."

He didn't flinch. "You would have been more useful dead."

The words landed flat and certain, and I swallowed hard, my throat suddenly tight in a way that had nothing to do with wolfsbane. For a second, it was like he'd knocked the wind out of me with nothing but the truth.

"I believe you," he said, before I could find anything to say. "I know you didn't kill him. But you clearly have secrets, Bonnie, and it's beyond me why you're hiding something from me now, of all times."

Heat crawled up my neck, some messy mix of guilt and defiance I didn't have the energy to properly untangle. It was easier to look past him than meet his eyes.

"Your uncle," I said, latching on to the first thing that came to mind, "before he died, said something. I believe it was... Beware of the night children."

To heal a Rogue

BONNIE

His eyebrows shot up, just a tick, like he was both surprised and not at all. "Deflection."

I rolled my eyes, not even bothering to hide it. I was way too tired for pretense. "You obviously want something, so why not just go after it? Use whatever clue you think you have, chase your answer, and let me wallow in peace."

He actually paused, his stare going far-off, gears turning behind his eyes. For a second, it looked like he was honestly mulling it over—my words echoing around in that complicated head of his.

"What could that even mean?" he muttered, more to the wallpaper than to me. The air felt a little less heavy, but not by much. Not enough for me to relax.

I rolled my eyes again, maybe harder this time. If he was keeping score, I was winning in sarcasm at least.

"It's just a dumb rhyme," I said, shrugging. "Everyone gets it drilled into their heads as kids. Don't tell me you've forgotten."

Something flickered in his expression then—recognition, lightning-quick and sharp.

"Oh."

I pressed on. "It's a code, right? Or maybe just a warning. Do you know what it means?"

He hesitated. "Not really," he said, but there was something off in the way he said it, like he was holding something back. "It's just an old story. The curse of the first people." He shook his head, slow, deliberate. "Maybe the rogues have started using it as a slogan."

"So you think rogues are behind this?"

He nodded, lips pressed thin. "It fits. But they didn't do it alone. That's what I need to find out."

We came to a stop in front of a door, and he nodded at it. "Here we are."

Right away, I could tell this wasn't your average guest room. There was a keypad and a regular old lock—extra security, like maybe royalty stashed their secrets here. He punched in the code so quick I barely registered the numbers before the lock clicked open.

The room was lilac.

Not a whisper of purple, but an all-out, unapologetic wave of it. The curtains, the chairs, the damn carpet—soft, girly, and so at odds with the man who just marched inside like he owned every shadow.

"Seriously? This is your room?" I asked, and couldn't help the grin tugging at my mouth.

He didn't answer. He just strode over to the windows and yanked the curtains open, letting sunlight spill all over the place. For a heartbeat, I wasn't sure he'd even heard me.

My attention snagged on a picture frame across the room, half-covered by a swath of dark fabric, the kind of thing someone does when they can't quite face what's underneath. I drifted over—couldn't help it—and lifted the cloth just enough to peek.

A woman's face looked back, beautiful in a way that made you want to look twice, her eyes alive with warmth and a smile that didn't seem forced. But you could almost tell she was not happy. Next to her: a man, stiffer than a board, formal even frozen in a photo. And in front—there was a kid grinning so wide you could count every tooth. It was the only honest thing in the whole portrait.

The boy looked a lot like Lysander.

I sensed him at my back before I heard a thing. It was just a subtle shift in the air, enough to raise the hair on my arms. I turned, startled to find him suddenly close, like he'd floated across the carpet without a sound. He wasn't looking at me at all. His gaze was fixed on the photo, the set of his jaw unreadable. For a breath, neither of us spoke.

His hand reached for the cloth in my fingers. He was gentle with it. Clearly not rushing me, as he stayed steady. He covered the picture again, slow and careful, like he was tucking away something fragile. The woman's face disappeared. The silence lingered heavy in the room.

"Is that them?" I asked, softer than I meant to. "Your parents?"

He hesitated, then nodded. "Yes."

"Your mother's beautiful," I said. It was the sort of thing you say when you don't know what else to say, but it was true. Her smile had haunted the room and my mind for a moment. I did not remember much of her during my time in Lily of the Valley. Not that I remembered much. I blotted it all out.

He didn't look at me. "Was." One word, flat and final, and it thudded between us so hard I almost winced.

There was definitely some history there.

I wanted to say something—something comforting or brave or at least not idiotic. But all I managed was a thick silence. The urge to reach out warred with caution. I stood there, awkward and useless, until my stomach betrayed me, loud as a thunderclap in the hush.

The sound was so ridiculous that we both froze. His eyes whipped to mine. I felt the heat rush to my cheeks, mortified. But then, to my utter shock, he laughed. Like... he really laughed, deep and rough, as if the sound had been buried for a long time.

I couldn't help it. I laughed too, the tension in my chest breaking apart like ice under sunlight. For a second, it was just two people in a room, nothing more complicated than that.

He gave me a small, real smile. "Come on. Let's get you something to eat." He turned toward the door, and as he did, it felt like the heavy things between us—his mother, the past, the ache in his voice—lifted just a little. For a brief moment, it was just the two of us and the promise of something simple, like food and company, instead of all the pain we were carrying.

He reached for the handle before stopping.

His hand remained on the knob as he glanced back at me.

"Actually..." His eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Maybe you should stay here."

I frowned. "Why?"

"Because I'm not convinced someone won't try to poison you."

I blinked.

"...Excuse me?"

"You're the woman half this great pack house believes murdered the King." His tone was matter-of-fact, as though he were pointing out that it might rain. "Grief doesn't always produce rational decisions."

"You really think they'd go that far?"

"I know some of them would." His gaze didn't waver. "Most would never act on it. A few might convince themselves they're delivering justice."

I folded my arms. "That's... reassuring."

"It isn't meant to be."

"So your solution is to lock me in your bedroom?"

"My solution is to keep you alive."

I stared at him for a long moment before sighing.

"Fine by me. Honestly, after today, hiding in a room sounds pretty appealing."

The tension around his shoulders eased just slightly.

"I'll have someone I trust bring your food."

"Someone you trust?"

"That list is shorter than it should be."

"This pack has fucking issues."

"I'm painfully aware."

I shrugged. "Fine. I'll stay."

He gave a single nod before pulling open the door.

He almost walked straight into an elderly man whose hand was already raised to knock.

The old man stepped back with surprising agility, smoothing the front of his waistcoat before offering a practiced smile.

"Alpha Lysander," he said with a courteous incline of his head. "You are a remarkably difficult man to find."

Lysander sighed. "I was hoping to stay that way."

"Unfortunately, that is no longer possible." The steward's smile became apologetic. "We need you in the royal dressing room."