

To heal a Rogue

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To heal a Rogue

BONNIE

"For what?" Lysander said.

"It's getting late," the steward said, his tone the particular blend of patient and immovable that told me he'd delivered this exact speech to reluctant royals more times than he cared to count. "When you give your speech tonight, you'll need to look the part. Your coming coronation will also demand it. This is simply a preamble of what is to come."

"Well," Lysander said, "that can wait a bit."

"Unfortunately, that is no longer possible."

"Actually, myself and..." Lysander glanced sideways at me, and I watched him hesitate over what to actually call me, his mouth opening and then closing again like the word simply wouldn't cooperate.

The steward filled the gap for him.

"The rogue?" he said, and there was something cold threading through the word even as he tried to smooth it over with courtesy.

"She is not a rogue," Lysander said.

"Of course. You know best, Your Majesty."

I felt Lysander flinch at that. Not visibly, nothing anyone watching would have caught, but through the bond, faint and sharp, like a hand closing too tight around something delicate. I filed that away without knowing quite what to do with it.

"Regardless of what she is," Lysander said, "she is currently under my protection."

The steward's face didn't change much, though I could tell he had several opinions lined up behind his teeth, all of them held firmly in check. He had the look of a man who'd learned decades ago to separate what he thought from what his job required of him, and he wore that discipline like armor. I decided, somewhere in the back of my mind, that he would have made an excellent soldier in another life, one where his uniform came with a weapon instead of a clipboard.

"Well," he said. "Shall we?"

"How long will it take?" Lysander asked.

"A while," the steward said, and then, as if he'd already anticipated exactly why Lysander was asking, he added, "If you're worried about the rogue's safety, she's welcome to come along."

"I cannot impose," I said quickly. "I'm fine here."

I did not want to keep trailing behind him. I was quite alright here.

My stomach chose that exact moment to growl again, loud enough that I nearly cursed out loud from sheer mortification.

The steward's mouth twitched, the closest thing to amusement I'd seen cross his face since he'd appeared in the doorway.

He then turned to the only person he respected.

"The moment I have you settled with the royal tailor," he said to Lysander, "I'll go to the kitchens myself and bring her something to eat."

Lysander studied him for a long moment. "You look like you want to kill her."

The steward didn't even blink. "My thoughts are irrelevant on the matter."

"That's not a denial."

"I'm sure you have your reasons for allowing her to still walk free," the steward said, folding his hands neatly in front of him. "Perhaps you intend to extract information from her. Understand why she did what she did before the verdict is settled properly." He inclined his head slightly, the gesture almost respectful. "That is all right by me. Because I understand justice will be served once night falls. That is good enough for me, and that should be good enough for every wolf in these walls and beyond it."

Something about the calm certainty in his voice sent a small chill up my spine. Not because it was cruel exactly, but because it was so entirely without malice, so matter-of-fact about the fate he assumed was already waiting for me. He genuinely believed it. There was no performance in it at all, and somehow that honesty scared me more than open hatred would have.

Lysander seemed to take that at face value too, some tension easing out of his shoulders that I didn't fully understand.

"Alright," he said. "Let's get this over with. She will be coming with me regardless. You can watch over her while I am being measured or whatever."

"That is fine by me."

The steward then turned smartly on his heel and started down the corridor, and Lysander fell into step behind him without a backward glance at me, clearly expecting me to follow.

Gosh... Once again, I regretted not running for it. I would have been fine here. Following him to get tailored for my own execution was repulsive to the bone, and his blatant protection from me would soon get tongues wagging. Did he not see that?

He then spared a glance when I remained still. His deeply unsettling green eyes examined me from head to toe, disrupting my train of thought completely. One of his eyebrows lifted silently, as if questioning why I wasn't already falling into step behind him.

I hesitated a second before I had to obey, my bare feet cold against the stone floor, my stomach still complaining loudly enough to draw a second glance from the steward's shoulder.

"You could have just let me stay behind," I muttered, catching up to Lysander's side.

"I could have," he said. "I didn't want to."

"Why not?"

"Because the last time I left you alone in a room," he said, low enough that only I would catch it, "you tried to escape. Who knows if you will give it another go?"

I nearly tripped over my own feet.

"You knew about that?"

"Of course, I felt the shift in the bond," he said, not looking at me, though something like satisfaction lived at the corner of his mouth. "I chose not to react to it because I hoped you would actually see reason. Though I am happy at the time, you did see reason, but I will not push that luck twice."

Heat crawled up my neck, some ugly mixture of embarrassment and irritation that I didn't have the energy to properly untangle. I said nothing, because there was nothing to say that wouldn't have made it worse, and we walked the rest of the corridor in a silence that felt entirely too loud.

The steward led us through a set of double doors into a room that smelled like starch and expensive fabric, bolts of cloth stacked along one wall and a raised platform positioned in front of a trio of mirrors angled to catch every side of a person at once. Two tailors were already waiting, with needles and pins arranged with military precision on a nearby table, and they bowed low the second Lysander crossed the threshold.

"Your Majesty," one of them murmured, and I watched that same flinch ripple through him again, quick and quiet.

"Alpha Lysander is fine," he said. "For now."

The tailors exchanged a glance but didn't argue, and one of them gestured him up onto the platform while the other reached for a measuring tape with the brisk efficiency of someone who'd done this a thousand times before.

I found a chair near the wall and sank into it, grateful for the excuse to sit, and watched the steward disappear back through the doors with a promise of food trailing behind him.

Lysander stood on the platform with his arms held slightly away from his sides, letting the tailors fuss over him, and for the first time since I'd met him, I almost laughed. He looked faintly ridiculous—too tall for the room, all sharp lines and fidgeting discomfort. Still, I couldn't help noticing the cut of his jaw, the way his hair fell over his brow, or the restless energy in his eyes. Not that I'd ever admit it, not even under threat of torture. Instead, I let myself focus on how awkward he seemed, telling myself that was all I saw. But the truth lingered uncomfortably: even standing there looking out of place, Lysander was—well, cute. And the thought irritated me almost as much as it made me flutter inside. Goddess... this bond was insufferable.

"You're staring," he said, without turning his head.

"I'm bored," I said. "Staring happens to be free entertainment."

"Charming."

"You should try it sometime. Being charming, I mean."

One of the tailors made a small strangled sound that might have been a laugh quickly swallowed, and Lysander's mouth twitched at the corner even as he kept his eyes fixed forward.

"I'll take that under advisement," he said.

The steward returned some minutes later carrying a tray, and the smell of warm bread hit me before I even saw the plate properly. He set it on the small table beside my chair without a word, his expression carefully neutral, and I mumbled something like thanks that he didn't acknowledge.

I ate fast, embarrassingly fast, and didn't care who was watching.

"Slow down," Lysander said, still facing the mirror while a tailor pinned fabric at his shoulder. "No one's taking it from you."

"You don't know that," I said around a mouthful of bread. "This whole place is full of people who'd probably enjoy watching me choke."

The steward, standing near the door with his hands folded behind his back, made no attempt to deny it.

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LYSANDER

The tailors moved around me with swatches of fabric fanned out like cards in a dealer's hand, holding each one up against my shoulder and murmuring to each other in the clipped shorthand of people who'd spent decades perfecting an aesthetic language I had no interest in learning.

"Any preference on color, Alpha Lysander?" the older one asked, holding a bolt of deep navy against my chest.

"I don't care," I said. "Pick whatever you think works."

He nodded and reached for another swatch, and that was when I noticed Bonnie's eyes drift toward the fabric table, quick and involuntary, gone again before I could be certain I'd actually seen it.

"You have opinions about the colors," I said. "I can tell."

She looked up from the last of the bread on her plate, startled. "I didn't say anything."

"You didn't have to."

I felt it through the bond before she could talk herself out of showing it, some faint discomfort, almost a cringe, at being singled out in a room full of strangers who already looked at her like she was something dangerous wearing a person's skin. I didn't particularly care that she was uncomfortable. Not in a cruel way. I simply valued whatever opinion she was hiding more than I valued her comfort in hiding it, and some stubborn part of me wanted to keep chipping away at whatever wall she kept trying to rebuild between us every time I got close enough to touch it.

"I haven't exactly had the luxury of being a fashion person," she said, "considering the life I've lived for the last few years."

"I always assumed women had an eye for this sort of thing," I said, mostly to see what she'd do with it.

She gave me a flat look that suggested she found the assumption both tired and mildly insulting, which was fair.

The younger tailor held up a bolt of rich purple fabric, turning it toward the light. "Purple is your color, Alpha Lysander," he said. "It sends the right message tonight. And it complements your eyes."

"Burgundy," Bonnie said, before I'd even had the chance to respond.

The tailor blinked, clearly gearing up to argue the merits of purple over whatever she'd just proposed, his mouth already opening around the beginning of a polite correction.

"Burgundy it is," I said, cutting him off before he could finish forming the sentence.

He closed his mouth. He was not impressed. But he also knew it would be foolish to refuse or argue. "Of course, Alpha Lysander."

I didn't look at Bonnie to see her reaction. Not one muscle moved from her face to give anything away. Her mind, however, was a different ballgame.

I felt something small and grudging shift through the bond, something that might have been surprise at being listened to at all. But she did quite a good job hiding it, and when our eyes met, I was certain she wanted to immediately shield me, but decided that doing so would just show how much of an effect I was having on her.

They finished the measurements quickly after that, murmuring about timing, about having something ready an hour before the ceremony began, and the older tailor glanced toward Bonnie mid-sentence and then simply let the thought die unfinished, like he wasn't entirely sure what role she was meant to play in the evening's arrangements and didn't want to be the one to guess wrong out loud.

"Right," I said, filling the silence before it could stretch too long.

I wanted to pull her out of that room the second the fitting ended, but she was still working through the last of the bread with the focus of someone who hadn't eaten properly in longer than she'd admit to, so I left her to it and crossed to the window instead.

The estate grounds below were filling fast. Vehicles rolled through the front gates in slow, steady lines, sleek and dark and unmistakably foreign, each one bearing some crest I recognized from years of tedious diplomatic dinners. Visiting Alphas. Visiting Lunas. All of them arriving to mourn a man most of them had genuinely respected, and none of them aware yet of the shape the evening was actually going to take.

My mind drifted back to what Bonnie had told me in the corridor. Beware of the night children. My uncle's last coherent words, apparently, spent on a line from a rhyme every pup in this territory got taught before they were old enough to understand what any of it meant.

Why would a dying man spend his final breath on a nursery rhyme?

There had to be something underneath it. Some hidden meaning the elders would know and I didn't, buried under generations of retelling until it had worn down into something soft enough for children. But I wasn't certain I trusted the elders currently occupying this estate. Not with Johann circling and the Elder Circle already halfway to deciding Bonnie's fate for their own political convenience.

I pulled out my phone.

It had been buzzing steadily against my hip for the better part of an hour, missed calls stacking up in a way that would have alarmed me on any other day, messages piling in faster than I could be bothered to read them. I scrolled past most of it, searching for one name specifically.

Elder Freya. My own pack's elder, the one who'd been close to my mother once, back before everything, the one person in Lily of the Valley I actually trusted to give me something honest instead of something politically convenient.

She'd already sent two messages.

I am so sorry for your loss.

And beneath it, the elders of Lily of the Valley would like to request a private meeting, given the news now spreading that you've been named heir to the Alpha King's seat.

I typed back a quick agreement to the second message, then paused, thumb hovering over the screen, before I added the question that actually mattered.

Freya, do you know anything about the hidden meaning behind the childhood rhyme every werewolf gets taught? The one that mentions the night children?

The two checkmarks turned green almost instantly. Then the second message went through as well. A moment later, the little indicator appeared showing she'd started typing.

I watched it for longer than I needed to, my chest tight in a way I didn't like.

There is no hidden meaning, she wrote. It is one of the first facets of our history as werewolves. It chronicles the love of our Lady Selene, and of course, her punishment of the vile ones who committed atrocities and claimed they did so in her name. The Night children are regarded as the abominations, Lycans.

My blood went cold.

I looked up from the phone and found Bonnie already staring at me, her hand frozen halfway to her mouth, some faint reflection of whatever I was feeling visible on her own face. The bond carried it both ways, apparently. She didn't need to ask what I'd just read. And even if she could not possibly know, she already felt the shape of it settling into my chest, cold and unwelcome.

I typed back with fingers that weren't quite steady.

Lycans?

I'd always considered that a myth. A stupid one, the kind parents used to scare pups into behaving, half-forgotten by the time anyone reached adulthood and started taking the actual history seriously. That was exactly why the phrase had been eating at me since the moment Bonnie repeated it to me in the corridor. Why would my uncle, dying, choose to spend his final coherent breath on something that childish? Something that shouldn't have mattered at all.

Is that not just a stupid myth? I typed.

Freya's reply came fast.

No. Lycans did exist.

I stared at the word *did* sitting there on the screen, something settling low and heavy in my stomach.

Did? I typed back.

Yes, she wrote. *Did. They are an extinct race now.*

I hit the power button on the phone and shoved it back into my pocket, my hand not quite steady, my mind already racing ahead of me toward conclusions I didn't want to reach.

Extinct. According to every history I'd ever been taught, according to an elder who would know our archives better than most people. And yet my uncle had spent his last breath warning me about them. I wondered... The two masked men who had put a bullet in his chest... Did they have something to do with this?

Rogues...

That had been my working theory since this morning. Disgruntled, unregistered wolves with a grudge against the crown, hired or manipulated into doing something they'd never have managed alone.

But rogues would not invoke the mention of Lycans.

Unless the men who'd killed my uncle weren't simply rogues acting out of grievance at all.

Unless creatures who were supposedly extinct had somehow survived long enough to walk into my uncle's library and put a bullet through the heart of a man who'd apparently known exactly what he was dealing with before he died.

Chapter 33: I pray it hurts

LYSANDER

She scraped the last of the bread off her plate the moment I stood up, and I gave her a second to swallow before I said it.

"Let's go."

She had no argument in her, not this time, just a small nod and a last glance at the steward.

"Thank you," she said. "For the food."

The steward inclined his head, his expression as unreadable as it had been since the moment he'd stepped in front of us in the corridor. "Consider it a final supper," he said, and the words landed with a weight I didn't like, casual and matter-of-fact, the way a man announces the weather.

I didn't correct him. There wasn't time, and some part of me suspected it would only make him dig his heels in further.

We left the tailor's room and started down the corridor, and I waited until we'd put enough distance between us and the door before I spoke.

"The masked men that attacked you," I said. "You saw one of them clearly. Was there anything odd about him? Anything at all?"

"Like what?" she said. "Did you find something?"

I glanced around once, checking the corridor for anyone close enough to overhear, and dropped my voice low.

"Beware of the night children," I said. "It refers to Lycans."

She looked at me like I'd said something absurd, her brow furrowing, and then a short laugh escaped her, disbelieving. "Is that code for something?"

"No," I said. "Lycans. Actual Lycans."

"Yeah," she said. "Our very own boogeyman. Every pup gets told to behave, or the Lycans will come for them in their sleep. It's not real, Lysander."

"I thought the same," I said. "Until about ten minutes ago. They were real. Apparently they still might be." I kept walking, forcing myself to keep my voice even despite the churn in my stomach. "So tell me. What did they feel like? I need you to be completely honest with me. Whatever happened in that library, I need the truth, not the version you think is safe to give me."

She stopped walking for a second, just long enough that I noticed, and when she caught back up, her jaw was tight.

"They shot your uncle," she said. "That's what I know. Neither of them shifted. Neither of them felt different from any other wolf I've ever stood near." She threw her hands up slightly, frustration bleeding into her voice. "They looked like anyone else, Lysander. How is a fucking Lycan even supposed to look?"

I studied her for a long moment; something in the careful way she'd delivered that answer didn't sit right with me. There was also what the bond was clearly hammering into me.

"You're still hiding something," I said.

"I'm not."

"Spill it." I stopped walking entirely now, turning to face her fully. "I have been nothing but honest with you since I dragged you out of that cell. I am trying to save your skin, Bonnie, and this only works if it goes both ways."

"Even if I were hiding something," she said, meeting my eyes without flinching, "which I'm not, it would have nothing to do with your uncle. Let's not forget I want my name cleared too. I have just as much reason to want the actual truth out there as you do."

I held her gaze a moment longer, searching for the lie in it and not quite finding one, though something about the whole exchange left an itch under my skin I couldn't scratch away.

She was clearly trying to push that whatever she was hiding was not important to the case, but how would she know that?

I hated that I needed to let it go. But there were clearly other pressing matters now.

"We should head to the library," I said instead.

"Wouldn't that place be off limits right now?"

"It would," I said. "But I should still be able to make a request."

We reached the library a few minutes later, and the doors were taped shut, a yellow cord stretched across the frame in a wide X, sentinels posted on either side with the particular stiffness of men trying very hard to look like they belonged there. One of them straightened the moment he registered who was approaching, and there was real deference in it, not the performative kind.

"Alpha Lysander," he said as he stepped forward. "We're actively investigating the scene. I'm afraid access is restricted."

"That's fine," I said. "All I need are some books. History texts. If they're not part of the crime scene itself, I'd appreciate it if someone could retrieve them for me."

"Of course," he said. "What subject, specifically?"

I hesitated, deciding against saying the word Lycan out loud in a corridor full of ears that didn't need to hear it yet.

"Anything on the first people," I said. "The old histories."

He nodded once and disappeared past the tape, and I noticed, in the second before he vanished from view, a flicker of something crossing his face when his eyes passed over Bonnie standing slightly behind me. Disgust, quick and instinctive, gone almost as fast as it appeared, buried back under professional composure before I could call it out loud.

I said nothing. There wasn't a version of that conversation that would end well for anyone that was not Bonnie standing in this corridor.

We waited. I paced a short line in front of the taped door, restless in a way I didn't bother hiding, while Bonnie stood with her arms crossed, watching the sentinels watch her in return, her jaw set in that stubborn line she wore like armor.

Ten minutes passed, maybe more, before the sentinel reemerged with an armful of books, and another man trailing behind him carrying a second stack.

"This is what we could find, Alpha," the first sentinel said, stepping forward.

I moved to take the books from him.

That was when the second man dropped his stack entirely.

The books hit the stone floor with a heavy, scattered thud, pages splaying open, and I heard him gasp, a sharp, involuntary sound that yanked my attention straight to Bonnie beside me.

She had gone white. Completely white, all the color drained out of her face like someone had pulled a plug somewhere beneath her skin.

I looked back at the man who'd dropped the books.

He wasn't quite dressed like the other sentinels. The uniform was close, close enough to pass at a glance, but there was a variation in the cut, a detail that marked him as something else. A retainer. Like Bonnie had been, before her hair and everything underneath it came undone in the library.

He was shaking.

Not the kind of tremor that came from cold or nerves. This was rage, pure and barely contained, his whole body vibrating with it, his hands curling into fists at his sides as his eyes locked onto Bonnie's face and refused to move.

He charged her.

I moved before I'd finished deciding to. Every instinct in me surged forward at once, some cold and immediate certainty rising up through my chest that I would not hesitate, that if this man's hands got anywhere near her I would put him down and feel nothing about it afterward. My wolf was already there, already awake, already calculating the fastest path between where I stood and where he was heading.

The other sentinel got there first.

He dropped his own stack of books and grabbed the retainer around the chest, hauling him back with both arms locked tight, and the man fought against the hold with a strength that seemed to come from somewhere far beyond ordinary fury. He screamed as he strained against the grip, his voice cracking with the force of it.

"You monster!" he shouted, his eyes never leaving Bonnie. "All retainers will suffer for your crimes! The ones who gave you a roof in this estate will be jailed! Killed, most likely! And for what? Because they could not see past your deceit? Others will lose their positions entirely because of what you did!" His whole face had gone red, twisted with something that looked less like anger and more like grief wearing anger's face. "You deserve more than death!"

"Control yourself," the sentinel holding him hissed, his own boots skidding slightly against the stone as he fought to keep his grip. "You are standing in front of the soon-to-be Alpha King."

The retainer didn't stop straining against the hold, though his volume dropped, some of the fight draining out of him even as the fury in his eyes stayed lit.

I looked back at Bonnie.

Her eyes had gone glassy, bright with the kind of tears that hadn't fallen yet but were close, dangerously close, and her hands had curled into the fabric of her sleeves like she needed something to hold onto just to stay upright.

Then she turned and bolted.

Chapter 34: The red in my hands

BONNIE

My body moved before my thoughts could form a single command. The need for escape took over, raw and primal, the same drive that had propelled me out of Lily of the Valley many years before, the same animal instinct that had kept me alive when logic or hope

would have failed. I did not know where I was going—only that I needed air, space, and the illusion of safety, if only for a moment.

Bare feet smacked against cold stone, the corridor tilting and thickening at the edges, and in the echo behind me, I could still hear Ryker's voice, ragged and furious as it ricocheted off the walls. The word monster lingered in the air, heavy and poisonous, refusing to dissipate.

"All retainers will suffer for your crimes."

I had learned long ago to accept threats when they were aimed at me; there was a cold comfort in knowing where the danger landed. But it was the rest of it—the collateral damage, the punishment for proximity—that scraped something vital raw inside my chest. These were people who had offered me scraps of kindness without knowing how much it cost them. They had shared their bread, their stories, and their exhaustion, letting me slip unnoticed into the quiet rhythm of their days. They had not deserved this, and yet their only mistake had been to exist within my orbit. Now, for having done nothing more than stand near me, they would pay a price I could not bear to imagine.

Because I was a liar. A deceiver. An abomination.

I rounded a corner, lungs seizing with panic, every breath shallow and frantic. The air felt thin, barely there, as if the world itself had shrunk to a narrow, suffocating tunnel. I glanced down, not quite conscious of the movement, and caught the flicker of red in my palms.

It was nothing like the cool blue that sometimes shimmered there when I healed—a rare and almost gentle occurrence. This red was something else entirely, a hungry, pulsing

light that seemed to feed on itself, alive with a ferocity that frightened me. I froze, rooted in the middle of the corridor, heart pounding, skin gone ice cold even as a feverish heat crawled up the back of my throat.

Why now? Why after years of nothing but blue, after so much careful distance, had this come back to claim me?

I remembered the last time. I'd buried that memory so deep I'd almost convinced myself it hadn't happened at all, but it came back now in pieces, sharp and unwelcome. The cell. The Beta crouched in front of me, smiling like I was an interesting problem rather than a child. My mother's blood on the floor. The room going red at the edges until it swallowed everything, and when my eyes opened again, there had been nothing left. Not the Beta. Not his sentinels. Just me, kneeling in cold silence, surrounded by an absence I had never been able to properly explain, even to myself.

They hadn't come back. Not one of them. Ever.

I didn't know what that meant. I still don't, not really. But some deep, animal part of me understood it as a warning, and that warning was screaming at me now, louder than the panic already tearing through my chest.

"Bonnie!"

Lysander's voice cut through the corridor behind me, closer than I expected, and I forced my legs to move again, faster this time, even though some distant, rational part of my brain already knew he was faster than me on a good day, and this was nowhere close to a good day.

"Give me space," I said, or tried to say, the words coming out thin and broken between breaths that weren't doing their job anymore.

"You are clearly not okay," he said, his voice closing the distance with every word.

"I said give me space."

"You did what you did to survive." His voice had gone steady, even, the tone of a man choosing his words with care even while running. "But that doesn't mean there won't be consequences, Bonnie. At the time, you beat the system. I understand why. But that was also a security threat to my uncle, who, as we all know now, is dead. Who knows what could have walked in behind you while every incompetent one of them was congratulating themselves on how careful they'd been?"

Something in me went very still and very hot at the same time.

I slowed down without deciding to, my whole body flooding with a rage so sudden and complete that it swallowed the panic whole for one blinding second.

"What the fuck did you just say?"

I'd forgotten entirely about my hand. About the flickering red glow still pulsing faint against my skin, about whether he could see it or not, about anything except the sheer, unbelievable audacity of the words that had just come out of his mouth.

He caught up to me in that stalled second and reached out, his hand closing around my wrist.

I don't know if he meant it as comfort or restraint. Probably some tangled version of both. But the second his fingers closed around my skin, something in my memory snapped wide open, raw and immediate, and I was nine years old again, watching a Beta's fingers reach for my throat with the same casual, unhurried certainty of cruelty, just before I watched the room fill with red and everyone standing in it suddenly ceased to exist.

"No!" I screamed, jerking my arm hard, trying to wrench myself free of his grip. "Let go of me!"

I braced for it. For him to flicker and vanish the way they had, dust and shadow scattering across stone, some horrible gap in the world where a person used to stand.

He didn't vanish.

He stood there, solid and real, his hand still wrapped around my wrist, his face caught somewhere between confusion and alarm, and when I finally forced myself to look down at where our skin touched, there was no red light there at all. My hand had gone still. Whatever had been building beneath my palm had simply stopped, the moment his fingers closed around me, like a candle snuffed out between two fingers.

We stared at each other. His breathing was fast too, I realized, though not from panic. From running.

Chapter 35: You Sound Just Like Your Father

BONNIE

"The last thing you should be worried about," he said quietly, "is a few incapable retainers who weren't equipped enough to keep a threat away from the King's side. If it was easy for you to walk into that estate, imagine how easy it would have been for someone far worse. That is a problem with the security, Bonnie. Not with you existing."

I finally managed to shrug his hand off, my whole body still trembling, my breath still coming in short, useless pulls.

"For a short while," I said, "they were my family." My voice cracked somewhere in the middle of the sentence, and I let it. "I didn't intend to hurt anyone. I just wanted a system that worked for me for once. I was uneducated. I couldn't function in the human world, couldn't get real work there, no papers, no history, nothing. So I still needed pack structure. I still needed the very thing I was so sure I could just walk away from, needed it to survive long enough to build something. To buy a house someday." My hands curled into fists at my sides, nails biting into my own palms. "I was so close. It would have ended so well. I would have just disappeared into some quiet human street and never bothered anyone again."

"This is why I despise her," I said, my voice dropping lower, bitter and shaking.

"Who?" he said.

"The goddess." I looked up at him, my eyes burning, and I didn't bother hiding how much I meant it. "I might not be anything special. Maybe she has some kind of vendetta against me specifically, some grudge from before I was even born. She even marked me with this hair, and that is fine. I've made peace with that. But what about them? The retainers. The staff. People who never did anything except stand near me. Surely she has to favor them at least. Why would she let my bad luck bleed onto people who never asked for any part of it?"

"Stop saying that," Lysander said, something sharp entering his voice now. "Why do you keep saying that? What happened to you that made you this way?"

I realized, too late, that I'd said far more than I meant to.

I shut the bond down immediately, slamming whatever door I could find between us, locking him out with a force that probably felt like a physical wall from his side of it.

"Nothing," I said. "It's nothing."

"You're shutting me out again."

"I'm not obligated to hand you everything."

"If you want me to actually help you," he said, "you have to let me in somehow. I can't work with half a person, Bonnie. I can't fix what I can't see or what you do not want me to see. If you should trust anyone in this world, it should be me. I am your mate."

"It's hard to trust you," I said, my voice fraying at the edges. "You have no idea the risk I'm taking just standing here talking to you at all in good faith when every rational part of me wants to run for the hills. I am trying. I am pushing past every limit I've ever set for myself just to still be having this conversation instead of running. But there are walls I cannot let you cross. Not yet. Maybe not ever."

He didn't answer right away, and I used the silence to drag in one steady breath, forcing my chest to slow, forcing my hands to stay still and normal and blessedly free of any color at all.

"Please," I said. "Do what you can to make sure those people are spared. The retainers. Whoever else gets caught up in this because of what I did. Please."

"Nobody is going to die," he said. "I will make sure of that." He paused, something in his jaw tightening. "But there still have to be consequences. You said as much yourself, earlier, when I offered to use the crown to stop them branding you a breeder tonight. You told me not to abuse the position. You told me it wasn't worth burning the goodwill I'll need."

"This is different." My voice rose again, sharp and desperate now. "This is so different, Lysander. Please. Bend the law here. Please save them."

I knew I sounded insane; I knew there was no rationality in the words that I was saying, but I did not give a damn.

I just wanted a way out. The easy way out.

"Sometimes what is cruel is necessary," he said.

I went still.

The words landed somewhere old and deep, somewhere I hadn't visited in years, and suddenly I wasn't standing in a corridor in his uncle's estate at all. I was standing in the back rooms of Lily of the Valley, watching an Omega get dragged out for some infraction I would never fully understand, watching the way the crowd looked away, the way the punishment was carried out in full view of everyone, specifically so it would be seen.

I remembered asking my mother why. Why it had to be that way, why cruelty got dressed up in ceremony and called justice.

Sometimes what is cruel is what is necessary, she'd told me, her voice flat and resigned in the way of someone repeating a lesson she hadn't chosen but had learned to survive by anyway. *As the Alpha would say, Everyone has a part to play.*

My lips parted before I'd fully decided to speak.

"You sound just like your father," I said.

The words hung there between us, and I watched something shift across Lysander's face immediately, his eyes going wide, sharp with a kind of alarm I hadn't expected.

"What?!" he said. "How would you even know what my father sounded like?"

I didn't answer. I didn't have an answer ready, because the truth had slipped out of some buried place before I'd built the proper wall around it, and now it was simply standing there in the open air between us, impossible to take back.

His eyebrows drew tight, some realization visibly assembling itself behind his eyes, piece by piece, faster than I wanted it to.

He looked back at me, his lips parting slowly.

"Were you Lily of the Valley? Before all of this?"

My skin prickled with a wave of goosebumps so sudden and complete it felt like the temperature in the corridor had dropped ten degrees in a single second. I took three steps back without deciding to, putting distance between us the same way I'd tried to put distance between myself and everything else since I opened that lounge door two nights ago.

"What?" I said, though I heard exactly what he'd asked, and some part of me already knew there was no version of this conversation where I got to walk it back now.

Chapter 36: The fall guys

JOHANN

My phone glowed on the small table beside me while I stood on the verandah, watching the slow procession of dark vehicles as they crawled through the front gates below. Every car seemed to spill out another Alpha or Luna, each dressed in mourning black, the fabric of their coats and dresses heavy with tradition and expectation. The elders moved among them like living shadows, sweeping in to greet the arrivals with a choreography so seamless, so practiced, that I could almost believe they had been born for this precise moment and would step into a hundred more just like it before they finally faded from memory.

I glanced down at the sharp intrusion of light. My mother's name filled the screen, a name that always carried weight, especially now. I answered on the second ring, my voice carefully measured while I kept my eyes on the endless stream of black-clad guests below.

She wasted no time on greetings, as if affection were a luxury we could no longer afford. Her voice sounded thinner than it had even that morning, a stretched thread on the brink of snapping. "I sent the number. Tell them you're calling from me," she instructed, her words clipped and brittle. "Order them accordingly. They won't listen otherwise, not after what happened."

"Understood," I replied, though she had already hung up before the last syllable left my mouth. The silence that followed was absolute. For a moment, I lingered in it, letting the enormity of her request settle over my shoulders before I stepped back inside, away from the eyes of guests and the scrutiny of elders. I unlocked the bottom drawer of my desk, retrieving the second phone—the one that never left this room and existed solely for conversations that could not be traced to daylight.

I unlocked the second phone and opened the message my mother had sent only minutes earlier. The number sat there on the screen without explanation, as though the digits themselves were enough to tell me what kind of conversation awaited on the other end. I keyed it into the dial pad carefully, checking each number once before pressing call.

The line rang only once.

The voice that answered was thin, trembling on the verge of fear, the sound of a man who knew exactly what kind of call he was receiving and had been dreading it from the moment that number had been passed along.

"Hello?" he managed, his voice pitched high and brittle.

"Am I speaking to the rogue who attacked the Alpha King," I asked, my own tone flat and cold, "and succeeded in killing him?"

There was a pause, a brief flutter of panic, and then, "I don't know what this is about."

I let the silence spool out, heavy and deliberate, the sort of pause that makes a man sweat. When I finally spoke, I gave him the only truth that mattered. "Edelina gave me this line," I said, letting her name fall like a stone into water.

His breathing changed at once, quickening, the fear sharpening into something closer to greed.

"When do we get the gift of the Lycan bite?" His voice shifted abruptly, eagerness overtaking caution, the promise of power transforming his fear into something sharper and more desperate. The hunger in his tone unsettled me, a feral edge that belonged to men who had learned to want with their whole bodies. Despite the rising tension, I kept my response measured, letting no hint of revulsion slip into my words.

"Not now," I replied. "Because your assassination, frankly, was one of the most poorly executed in recent memory. You can forget Luna Edelina's promise for the foreseeable future. Not until you do something for me."

A beat of silence stretched between us, brittle and charged. The man bristled, his composure slipping. "Do not think you can play us," he snapped, his voice rising in pitch. "We risked everything for this."

"You were supposed to be the fall guys," I said, my tone turning clinical. "Why did you run?"

They did not answer. So I went on.

"The cause," I droned on, and the reverence with which I spoke the word made it sound like a prayer—or maybe a curse. "The rogue network was supposed to get the bite for every man, not just the few of us. Were you and your accomplice too afraid to die for something bigger than yourselves?"

"Of course not!" He slammed back.

I nearly laughed at how quickly his bravado replaced the fear I had sensed earlier, pride swelling to fill the cracks in his courage.

"We aren't cowards," he insisted, the words tumbling over themselves in their haste. "A man interfered. But we still succeeded, and we made sure everybody got what they wanted. The dead man is more than enough of a scapegoat to be used. So what would be the need for us to die?"

This time, I did laugh—a sound sharp and cold that cut through the pretense. "Like I said. Sloppy." I let the word settle before continuing. "The boy is not dead."

A pause was longer this time, then a note of genuine confusion crept into his voice, bleeding through the bravado he'd been clinging to. "That is not possible. We put three

bullets in that classless dog. Those were special rounds. They took down the Alpha King without effort. How could that retainer still be alive?"

"The man," I said, slow and precise, "is actually a woman. And you are either mistaken, or you are lying to me now—badly, I might add—because from where I stand, it appears you did nothing more than knock her unconscious and then left your weapon conveniently within her reach." I let the accusation linger, the silence on the other end growing dense with uncertainty. "Let us be honest. The girl is unhurt. Perfectly fine, in fact."

He bristled, denial flaring. "No. We shot her. Why would we lie about that? Three bullets. I wanted him... I mean... well.. if you say it's her... I wanted her dead, and she should have been dead before we left that room."

For a moment, I simply sat with his words, letting them drift through the empty space between us while I turned over every detail, searching for the shape of the truth beneath his wounded ego and the tangled motives behind his story. Something was not adding up, and the puzzle of it intrigued me, a thorn in the back of my mind that refused to be ignored. Interesting.

"Regardless," I said, my voice low and measured, "she will most likely expose you both eventually, and with enough time, this entire arrangement unravels around us all. So let us dispense with the idea of self-preservation for now. One of you has to die tonight. The one with the scar at the mouth, preferably. Because she recognized him, saw his face in the light. Is that you?"

Chapter 37: Love Makes Fools of Kings

A hush fell, the sort born of panic. I could hear frantic, muffled mumbling on the other end, the kind of desperate negotiation that happens when men realize the world they thought was theirs is about to collapse inward. When the next voice came through, it was rougher, steadier, the voice of someone who had already glimpsed his own ending and was simply taking measure of it.

It was probably my fall guy.

"I have to die?" he asked, and for a second, I thought I heard something like relief in the gravel of his tone, as if the certainty of a clean ending was preferable to the sickening suspense of waiting.

"Yes," I replied, and I let the word settle between us, heavy as a stone. "Are you afraid?"

"No," he said, no tremor in his answer.

"Good." I let a smile thread itself through my words, the kind that communicated as much threat as comfort, and then I straightened, my gaze catching my own reflection in the window's dark glass. "You will come back tonight, just as you are, a criminal made for this stage. The story will be that word reached you of her sentence, that she is to be made a Breeder. She is one of your own, after all, someone you were forced to abandon in the aftermath of the assassination. So, in some misplaced act of mercy, you will return for her, believing death to be kinder than the fate that awaits her. You will kill her, and then yourself, or you will let the sentinels do what must be done, all in full view of every Alpha and Luna gathered in this territory. By morning, the rogue network will have reclaimed its place in the nightmares of every packhouse, and I will personally ensure that your sacrifice is not forgotten. The promise of the bite will be honored."

A brief silence came next. A pause that seemed almost respectful. "How do we go about it?" the scarred one asked, his voice accepting, the resignation of a man who understood that every choice he had made had led him directly to this moment. There was no fear left in it, only the grim clarity of a condemned man ready to walk the last mile.

"I will send the details," I said, and cut the call without waiting for further protest or question.

For a long moment, I stood there, the phone still balanced in my palm, feeling the tremor of adrenaline fighting the dull gravity of what I had set in motion. I let a smile pull at my mouth, not from triumph but from the cold satisfaction of inevitability.

Lysander's rise would be scorched to ash before it could truly begin. An Alpha King had already been murdered during the time they were supposed to be together. Word was already spreading around. Though it was heavily stifled by the elders and their endless swift propaganda.

Still.... If the girl who was supposed to be publicly punished died next, alongside another terror attack in a place meant to represent the very height of royal security, there would be no recovering from it. Not with every witness who mattered gathered beneath the same roof. Not on the very night Lysander was meant to be presented as the future of the crown and publicly named its heir. His enemies would tear him apart with it. He would be branded incompetent, incapable of protecting his own people, much less an entire kingdom. His claim would be ruined before the crown could ever settle on his head.

Yet as the silence deepened around me, I could not ignore the words that had hung in the air during that last conversation. The rogue's insistence that the girl could not have been

unharmed—fine, completely untouched, not after three of the so-called special rounds had been aimed at her for the sole purpose of ending it.

Something about it gnawed at the edges of my certainty, pricking at my sense of how this world was supposed to work. I needed to see that for myself, needed to lay eyes on the impossible.

So I left my chambers, moving quickly through the dim corridors and down the stairwells, past sentinels who straightened at my approach, until I reached the holding cells in the lower levels of the estate. There, at the entrance, I found a sentinel standing rigid, his gaze flicking up at me.

"Take me to the cell holding the woman who killed my father," I ordered, my voice cool with command.

He bowed low, the movement practiced. "Alpha Johann. Alpha Lysander already came for her. He released her hours ago."

I felt something hot and immediate surge through my chest, a rush of disbelief and anger. "He released her?" I echoed, the words thick with incredulity.

"Yes, Alpha Johann."

"He released her?" I repeated, certain I had misunderstood him despite the fact that there was very little room for ambiguity in what he had said.

"Well... ehm... yes, Alpha. That is what I said."

I felt my jaw tighten.

Of course Lysander had.

For a moment, I said nothing, trying to understand what could possibly have possessed Lysander to remove her from the cells, when putting her there had been a necessary evil. He had practically fought them over the breeder sentence. He had publicly challenged me and even accused me of things because of the damn girl. Now, apparently, he had simply walked down here and released her as though the collective decision for her to be locked up meant nothing.

All for a girl he had known for what, a day or even less?

I frowned.

"I do not understand my cousin's obsession with that girl," I muttered. "This is beginning to reach realms of weird."

"I agree too."

My head snapped toward the sentinel.

The sentinel hesitated, clearly weighing whether to continue, but he eventually got over it and kept talking. "He also attacked one of our own for striking her. If I did not know better, I would say the girl has charmed him somehow."

I turned and fixed him with a long stare. "What did you say?"

"My apologies, Alpha Johann," he said quickly. "Forgive my insolence. I should not have spoken."

I stared at him, irritation already beginning to crawl beneath my skin.

"Just fucking spit it out. What exactly did I hear you say?"

He swallowed, uncertainty flickering across his features. "I said I believe the girl has charmed him, Alpha Johann. But I apologize. Profusely. I did not mean it. I swear I meant no disrespect to Alpha Lysander, or to you, or to anyone. I should never have opened my mouth in the first place, much less to say such madness. It was an improper thing to suggest, Alpha. Completely improper. I spoke without thinking, and I sincerely beg your forgiveness. Please."

For a long moment, I simply watched him, feeling the shape of understanding click into place behind my eyes, the sudden certainty of a puzzle solved. I snapped my fingers quietly, something like warmth spreading through me after a long frost. Of course. It all made sense now.

My cousin was in love again. And I knew how far Lysander could go when he was in love. This was getting interesting.

Chapter 38: Ghosts of Lily of the Valley

LYSANDER

The way she recoiled, stumbling backward as if I had struck her, told me everything I needed to know. Words might lie or withhold, but her body betrayed the truth she could not bring herself to say. That sharp flinch, the way color drained from her cheeks at the idea that I might have figured it out... figured her out.

I had.

"When?" I asked, my voice gentler than I intended, weighted with something like dread. The question hung in the air, heavy with the knowledge that whatever answer she gave would change the ground beneath both our feet.

"I just said I don't know what you're talking about." Her denial was instinctive, but the crack in her voice made it brittle.

"You can tell me," I said evenly, "or I can find out on my own. Given who I am about to become tonight, that second option will not take long."

She barked a short, humorless laugh, the kind that sounded more like a wound than amusement. The sound of it scraped across something in me I did not know was still raw.

"I was an Omega," she said, her words clipped and tired. "Back in Lily of the Valley. The usual runt, the one no one bothers to remember. I would not have mattered to anyone who kept records."

"If you were there while my father was alive," I replied, "then you are on a list somewhere. He documented everything. Everyone." I did not mean for the words to sound like an accusation, but they landed that way all the same.

She let out a long breath, her shoulders sagging beneath the weight of memory. For a moment, she looked years younger, as if the fight had drained out of her bones. "It was a long time ago," she said quietly. "I was probably nine or less when I ran."

"With your mother?"

"She was already dead by the time I ran." The words fell flat. It felt like something practiced after years of silent repetition, worn smooth by the habit of keeping pain close but invisible. "I hid in the territory for a few days after. I was terrified I would be caught with all the sentinels patrolling, that what happened to her would happen to me, too. But I got out. Eventually."

Her words faded, and the space between us grew dense with things left unsaid. I studied her posture... the way she folded her arms protectively across her middle, with her body angled as if she might ward off the past by sheer force of will. There was a fragility in the way she held herself, but also a kind of battered resilience, as though she had learned over time that survival sometimes meant holding every piece of yourself together with nothing but memory and the refusal to collapse. I felt the urge to reach for her, to bridge the gap with touch or gentle reassurance, but I hesitated. The distance between us was not only physical; it was thick with the accumulated weight of history, regret, and the restless presence of all that could not be undone.

A chill crept into my chest at the mention of her mother, a heaviness settling there as I considered the legacy of grief and violence we both carried. It was a coldness that had nothing to do with the air in this closed space and everything to do with the realization that the tragedies shaping us were not simply our own, but inherited from those who had walked these halls before us. The echo of her loss reverberated in the quiet, making the corridor itself feel haunted.

I found myself thinking of the words that had slipped from my mouth minutes before.

Sometimes what is cruel is necessary.

My father's wisdom, or at least his rationale, handed down like a family relic, polished smooth by repetition and wielded as justification for every hard choice. I had not realized until she called me out how deeply that phrase had embedded itself in me, how easily I had let it become my own, how insidiously a parent's logic can take root in the child who heard it often enough.

In her eyes, I saw the sting of that inheritance, and I wondered, not for the first time, whether any of us ever truly escape the patterns set for us by those who came before.

I didn't want to ask the next question. But I asked it anyway.

"Did my father kill your mother?"

"It wasn't him," she said. "Not directly. But it was done in his name, so it might as well have been his own hands doing it." She wrapped her arms around herself, a small, unconscious gesture that made her look younger than she was. "It was his Beta."

"Beta Casimir," I said, the name settling heavy in my mouth.

She didn't confirm it, but she didn't need to. Her silence did that for her.

"The Beta line in Lily of the Valley has been compromised for years," I said. "My father's Beta died some time ago. No heir stepped forward to claim the position, not properly."

I didn't tell her the rest of it. That the current line waiting in the wings belonged to a child born specifically to preserve a bloodline that had nearly gone extinct. A boy destined for a role that would likely tangle itself around whatever children I eventually had of my own. It felt irrelevant standing here, watching her come apart in a corridor that smelled like old stone and older grief.

"Did he really die?" she said. "Casimir?"

"My father hired both a Delicate and a healer to determine what happened to him," I said. "Both came back with the same answer. He perished." I paused. "I'm... I'm... sorry."

"Well," she said, wiping at her eyes with the back of her hand, quick and rough, like she resented the tears for showing up at all, "that's part of the reason I became a rogue in the first place. I never felt safe in Lily of the Valley. Never truly felt safe here either, if I'm being honest. But it worked. It paid well." Her voice cracked slightly. "The others, though... The people I worked alongside here. This was their home. Their family. And now they're going to suffer and die because of me. People are going to suffer and die because of me again."

She scrubbed at her face one more time and steadied her breathing, forcing something calm back into her features that didn't quite reach her eyes.

"But I understand," she said. "Some things just have to happen. That's the way of the world."

I reached for her, some instinct in me wanting to close the distance, to offer something with my hands since my mouth had nothing useful left to give her. I stopped myself halfway, my arm hanging awkward and unfinished in the space between us.

I didn't know what to say. I wanted to fix it, wanted to hand her something that would undo all her pain entirely, but there was no version of a fantasy that could give her that, and I refused to insult her with an empty one.

"Trouble in paradise, cousin?"

The voice came from behind me, light and mocking, entirely too pleased with itself.

I turned and found Johann standing at the mouth of the corridor, arms crossed, an expression on his face that looked almost cheerful, which on any other day, in any other context, would have been the single most alarming thing about him.

Chapter 39: The girl in the forest

LYSANDER

"I legitimately do not have time for this," I said.

"Lucky for you," Johann said, "I'm not here for you. I'm here for the girl." He tilted his head, something performative in the gesture, like he was warming up for an audience only he could see. "Imagine my surprise when I went down to her cell and heard something quite interesting."

I stepped between them before he could close the remaining distance.

"That's about as far as you walk."

Johann threw his hands up in a mock shudder, his mouth curving into something that wasn't quite a smile. "How terrifying."

"Why are you protecting her?" he said, dropping the theatrics for half a second, something sharper cutting through. "Are you working with her now? Is that what this is?"

"Why are you looking for her at all?" I said.

"Maybe I wanted to understand why she did it." His voice hardened, real anger surfacing beneath the mockery. "Why she brutally murdered my father and shows absolutely no remorse for it, especially given how thoroughly her actions upended my entire life." He paused, tilting his head the other way now, something calculating creeping back into his expression. "Except. Except of course, it does make a certain kind of sense."

"You have been remarkably protective of her," he continued, circling slightly, his eyes flicking between us. "You don't even know her, cousin. And I find myself wondering why you're fighting this hard for a rogue. Could it be because you—"

He never finished the sentence.

His hand blurred forward, faster than I could track, fingers clamping around Bonnie's throat before my mind caught up to what I'd seen.

Something inside me snapped.

One instant he was standing. The next, I had him by the collar, driving him into the stone floor hard enough to rattle the room. The impact cracked through the silence. My fist was already drawn back, every muscle coiled, the punch halfway thrown before the last fraying strand of restraint wrenched it to a stop an inch from his face.

For a heartbeat, neither of us moved.

Then he laughed.

The sound burst out of him, loud and raw, echoing off the stone walls. There was no fear in it, no pain, only manic delight, as though this was exactly the reaction he'd been hoping to provoke, and knowing Johann, I was not too far from the truth.

"Looks like I have my answer," he said, looking past my raised fist toward Bonnie, then back at me, something gleeful settling into his expression. "Do you... I don't even know... Like her?"

I didn't answer that. I couldn't, not with the truth sitting so close to the surface that even silence felt like a confession.

"All this," I said, keeping Johann pinned beneath me as he continued to grin, looking more entertained than threatened by the position he was in, "because Uncle passed you over for the throne and gave it to me instead? Is that what this is? Have you started seeing things now, cousin? Chasing ghosts because it's easier than accepting the hand life dealt you?"

The words tasted bitter.

I hated fighting like this. Hated twisting old... and let us face it, this was a relatively new wound, just to throw someone off balance. But if it kept him from finishing whatever accusation he'd been about to make, I'd gladly carry the guilt.

His grin faltered.

Only for a heartbeat, but it was enough.

The amusement drained from his eyes, replaced by something darker, something raw. I'd struck exactly where I'd intended, and for the first time since this confrontation began, Johann wasn't the one controlling the conversation.

At least that was what I thought was happening at first.

"I see clearly," he said. "Everyone will be able to see it too." His grin sharpened. "Do you remember that moment when we were younger, cousin? When your mother took herself out in front of you?"

The corridor vanished.

Not literally, but so completely that it may as well have.

All I could see was her.

Not broken on the stone below.

Smiling.

That gentle, impossibly warm smile she always reserved for me, the one that could quiet every fear I had with nothing more than a glance. It flashed across my mind with painful clarity, so vivid that for the smallest fraction of a second, I almost expected to hear her laugh.

Then came the memory I'd spent years trying to bury.

The open window.

Her stepping onto the ledge.

The impossible moment when she looked back.

And then she was gone.

A violent ringing filled my ears.

My heartbeat became a relentless roar, drowning out the world until Johann's face was all that remained.

He had no right.

No right to drag her into this.

No right to speak of her with that twisted grin, reducing the most sacred, devastating memory of my life to a weapon.

Something inside me tore loose.

A sick feeling in my chest caused it to turn cold and rigid all at once.

He turned his head toward Bonnie without waiting for permission, still trapped under my grip, entirely unbothered by the position.

"It was quite the spectacle," he said to Bonnie, sounding as though he were sharing an amusing family anecdote instead of ripping open the worst Chapter of my life. "Poor Lysander took it terribly. Convinced himself it was somehow his fault. Started looking at his father like the man had personally murdered the moon. He'd disappear for days at a time, leaving the entire palace scrambling after him." Johann gave a theatrical sigh. "Very dramatic. Rather inconsiderate, really."

His gaze slid back to me, his smile sharpening.

"Then, during one of those little adventures, he wandered home clutching a rag soaked in blood, insisting he'd met a girl in the forest." He chuckled. "Naturally, none of us ever saw her. Not once. But he became utterly fixated on her, as though she'd descended from the heavens just for him."

He tilted his head.

"My father and his thought indulging the fantasy would put it to rest. They sent trackers, consisting of witches who had the talent and, of course, Delicates to figure out who this mysterious girl was."

His smile widened.

"An unfortunate decision."

"The first ones would peep and come back to this world screaming, their eyes burned clean out of their skulls. Others never returned at all. They would literally perish. Even the witches couldn't get close with their spells without paying a price." He gave an exaggerated shrug. "So imagine our confusion. Was the girl real? Was she some ancient creature wearing a child's face? Or had dear cousin simply stumbled into something that should have stayed buried?"

His eyes locked onto mine, bright with malicious amusement.

"Whatever it was, it certainly left a lasting impression on him."

He looked back at me, something almost fond in his expression now, the way you'd look at an old joke that never stopped being funny to you personally.

"I always assumed you'd stay stuck on that mystery girl until the day you died," he said. "I suppose this one's just as fascinating to you. Interesting hair. Probably an interesting life

to match." His eyes flicked to Bonnie again, deliberately slow. "Do you have the hots for her because she might be a murderer? Is that the appeal?"

Chapter 40: A satisfying tale

LYSANDER

I let him go.

Not gently. I released my grip and stood, stepping back, my whole body still humming with the effort of not finishing what my fist had started.

"You sound borderline insane," I said.

He pushed himself up off the floor, unhurried, brushing dust from his sleeves with exaggerated care.

"Do you know what's waiting for you tonight, girl?" he asked, turning his full attention to Bonnie. His voice was smooth, almost pleasant, which only made it more sinister. "Do you know what my dear cousin has agreed to let them do to you?"

His gaze swept over her with calculated scrutiny.

"You know, I've been having a rather difficult time believing you're as innocent as everyone, and my everyone, I mean my dear cousin here, seems determined to make you out to be."

A slow smile tugged at his mouth.

"I've heard the investigators recovered shell casings from the library that didn't match the rounds fired into my father." He lifted a shoulder in an exaggerated shrug. "According to you, there were other shooters. Other people involved. A convenient little story."

His eyes lingered on her, searching.

"And yet..." he murmured. "Here you are."

He gestured lazily toward her.

"Standing. Breathing. Barely worse for wear."

His finger settled on the bandage wrapped around her temple.

"Well... except for that."

A soft laugh escaped him.

"Forgive me if I find it curious. A room full of bullets, assassins lurking in the shadows, and the woman at the center of it all walks away with little more than a bump to the head, which you did not even have in the morning, so that must have been the work of disgruntled ."

He looked at her as though he already knew the answer.

"Tell me, Bonnie... why do you think that is?"

I felt her fear spike through the bond, sharp and sudden, and something about its shape confused me. Not exactly fear of Johann's accusation. Something underneath it, something older.

Was he circling something real that Bonnie was keen on keeping without even knowing it?

"But enough about that. I'm probably wasting my breath." Johann waved the thought away with a lazy flick of his hand before his smile returned, brighter than before. "There is something you should know, though."

He looked directly at Bonnie.

"You should be very careful with my cousin."

His eyes glittered with malicious delight as they drifted back to me.

"He had a mate once. A girl from Silvercreek. Their Luna, before she was demoted to an Omega due to some horrible shit she did."

He let the silence linger, deliberately stretching it until it became unbearable.

"She went back home in pieces. Literally."

The words landed like a blade sliding between my ribs.

The world narrowed to Johann.

I crossed the distance before I was even aware I'd moved.

My hand fisted in the front of his shirt, yanking him forward so violently his heels left the floor for a heartbeat before I slammed him back against the corridor wall. Stone groaned beneath the impact.

My breathing had turned ragged.

Every instinct demanded I break him where he stood.

Instead, I forced the words through clenched teeth, each one scraped raw.

"Choose," I said, my voice dangerously quiet, "your next sentence very, very carefully."

"Why?" he said, entirely unbothered, still grinning through the grip I had on him. "I think we should all be honest today. What was that girl's name again? Hazeleigh?" He tilted his head, pretending to search his memory. "No, that's not quite right. It was Hazel."

That was when I hit him.

There wasn't a decision.

One moment he was smiling, the next my fist crashed into his jaw.

He slammed onto the stone with a sickening crack, but instead of staying down, he threw his head back and laughed. The sound rang through the corridor, bright with manic amusement. Blood spilled from the corner of his split lip, and he swiped at it with the back of his hand before grinning at the crimson staining his fingers.

"Ouch," he said between laughs. "That actually hurt."

He glanced at the blood, then back at me.

"About as much as being accused of murdering my own father." His smile widened.
"Especially when that particular distinction seems to belong to..."

"Johann."

My voice was low, stripped of everything but warning.

He looked positively delighted.

"Lysander," he echoed, mocking my tone with infuriating precision. "What? Did I say something wrong?"

He pushed himself onto one elbow, unfazed.

"It doesn't feel very nice, does it? Having people casually decide you're capable of the worst thing imaginable." He chuckled. "Being handed a title you never asked for."

His grin sharpened into something cruel.

"Like Murderer."

"That's not what happened." I shot back.

"Who cares what happened?" he said, pushing himself back up onto his elbows, still grinning through blood. "Or how it happened. Nobody does. Tonight, for example. It will be another story of 'the Omega did it'. That's a satisfying enough story for anyone tonight." He turned toward Bonnie, his expression shifting into something almost gentle, almost sincere, which somehow made it worse. "Even though I want you dead," he said, "you should be careful with this one. I have no problem baring my teeth when it counts. But him." He nodded toward me. "He's an Asker to the bone. A deceiver. He will betray you in the end. It's simply what his type is built for."

Bonnie's voice cut through before I could answer.

"I already know he intends to make me a breeder when evening comes," she said, steady despite everything Johann had just thrown at her. "He told me himself." Her eyes flicked toward me, then back to Johann. "I understand how packs work. Even royal ones. The people need somewhere to put their grief, and a female rogue who lied her way into a male retainer's uniform makes a perfectly satisfying target for that." She lifted her chin slightly. "And if you must know, he offered to defend me publicly. I was the one who told him not to. What I actually want is to find the people who really did this. To clear whatever suspicion you're still holding onto, Your Highness. And to bring actual justice to your father, whether you believe I deserve credit for wanting that or not."

The look on my cousin's face in response to her words was precious to look at.