

To heal a Rogue

C 41-50

To heal a Rogue

LYSANDER

Johann's mouth curled, a sneer and a smirk wrestling for control across his bruised face. Blood streaked his chin, but he wiped it away with the back of his hand—dismissive, as if pain were a familiar nuisance, not worth remarking. When he straightened, shoulders squared with a weary swagger, he offered a twisted half-grin.

"Yikes." The word dropped with practiced nonchalance. "Well. Don't say I didn't warn you."

He turned and strolled off, each footstep echoing in the stone corridor, unhurried, almost insolent in its measured cadence. I watched the line of his back until he disappeared beyond the bend, only then registering the tension that had locked my breath in my chest. When the hush returned, it pressed in, thick and expectant.

Bonnie lingered in the silence, her gaze steady and unreadable. I found her eyes, searching for a foothold in the aftermath.

"About what he said... About Hazel..." My voice faltered on the name, the syllables shaped by memory and regret.

She shrugged, but the movement was careful, calculated. "I don't care much about that," she answered, though her tone betrayed an undercurrent, words chosen with surgical precision, as if she feared what honesty might cost her. "Of course you did it. Half the things your uncle let slip in that library made it obvious you might have killed your own father." She hesitated, voice thinning. "That isn't a bad thing, for what it's worth. I know what kind of man he was. But using an Omega to do it—"

"That isn't what happened." The denial came out sharper than I intended, brittle and immediate.

Her stare sharpened, unwavering. "Wasn't it said she killed your father? Isn't that why she ended up dead?"

The bluntness of it cracked something open inside me. Air scraped my lungs. I forced myself to hold her gaze.

"I did it," I said quietly. "To protect someone."

She absorbed that, her features softening only slightly. "She might have been born a Luna. That doesn't change the fact that she died an Omega. The lower ranks always take the fall." Her voice was low, certain, a verdict delivered from experience. "And then the

Alphas, the Betas, the Gammas—all of them wonder why the rogue networks always find new recruits."

I hesitated, a bitter taste rising. "This circles back to the retainers. Doesn't it?"

"Of course it does. It's all connected, Lysander. I honestly don't understand how you can't see that." She crossed her arms, the gesture protective, a flicker of exhaustion settling over her. "At the end of the day, you're still privileged. You get to decide who takes the fall and who gets protected. She didn't get that choice."

Hazel's name pulsed between us, a wound refusing to close. "Hazel was not a good person. Not in the slightest. She was manipulative and cruel, and she deserved what came to her. I won't back down from that."

Bonnie snorted, the sound brittle. "Okay."

A prickling indignation rose in my chest, uncoiling before I could suppress it. Bonnie's composure, so unyielding, suddenly felt like an affront, as if she alone had claim to the moral high ground. I steadied my voice, hoping to reclaim whatever balance had gone missing between us.

"And you," I said, watching for the flicker in her eyes, "Johann implied you were shot. That clearly isn't the case. Care to explain that?"

She didn't flinch. "Maybe because I wasn't shot." The words fell with a finality that left no room for argument, flattening any attempt at further interrogation.

For a moment, silence expanded between us, filling the corridor with something heavier than accusation. My breath left me slow and deliberate. She'd locked herself behind a wall and, if I was honest, I'd been doing the same since Johann dredged up Hazel's name. We each curated our truths, editing out the parts that cut too close. It occurred to me how easy it would be to judge her for omission, how impossible it would be to do so without hypocrisy.

I raked a hand through my hair, searching for composure in the familiar gesture. The air felt different now: not hostile, just thick with all the things unspoken.

"Okay," I said at last. "I'll do it. I'll find a way to reduce the punishment for the retainers caught in the crossfire. Spare them, if I can manage it. Does that make you happy?"

She hesitated, her eyes searching mine, something fragile shifting beneath her careful exterior. "You mean that?"

"I've kept my word to you twice already." My tone was gentle, but the promise was ironclad. "Of course I mean it."

She swallowed, her gaze dipping for the first time. "Thank you."

I let the moment settle between us, the corridor growing quieter, the space tinged with something almost warm. "I hope," I said quietly, "that whatever history Lily of the Valley handed you, whatever grievance you carry against the goddess herself, you'll come to trust me."

We stood suspended in that hush, the balance between us restored if only for a heartbeat. I held her gaze a moment longer than I meant to, then looked away, breaking the spell. "Let's get those books."

We emerged from the corridor to find the library's hush unsettled, the retainer gone and only two sentinels remaining. The first sentinel, the one who had held the retainer back, stood with arms folded, his posture designed to project calm authority. A second, unfamiliar sentinel glanced at the pile of books abandoned on the cold marble floor.

The books—their leather spines scuffed, one with a torn dust jacket—seemed out of place, as if their abrupt displacement echoed the lingering tension in the air. I gathered them up, the weight of each volume grounding me in the present, and set them aside as the sentinel spoke.

"I apologize for his behavior, Alpha Lysander." His voice carried a careful formality, practiced and impersonal. "I hope you'll forgive the outburst."

"It doesn't matter," I said, my tone clipped, unwilling to dignify the incident with further attention. "He knew better than to speak that way in front of me."

For a heartbeat, I considered making an example of the retainer—some pointed remark on discipline, perhaps even a threat. But then I caught Bonnie's expression, composed yet

wary, a silent plea for restraint. The desire to defend her bristled inside me, but I let it subside, recognizing the boundary she set without words.

"I will just take the books," I said, breaking the tension.

The first sentinel bent to collect a stack, the second followed suit, and together we moved down the corridor. The cadence of our footsteps mingled with the faint hum of evening settling across the estate.

I led them to my mother's old quarters, my fingers recalling the keypad code by rote. The lock disengaged with a muted click. Inside, the air retained a faint trace of her perfume. Something floral, almost ghostly. The sentinels set the books on the dressing table and withdrew, leaving Bonnie and me alone in the fading light.

I reached for the door, intending to seal us in a pocket of privacy, when the sound of determined footsteps approached. An elder appeared at the threshold, his robes shifting with each brisk movement, eyes sharpening when they found me.

"The steward said I'd find you here," he announced, voice carrying the weight of expectation. I met his gaze, feeling the pressure of protocol return.

"What now?" I asked, unable to keep the fatigue from my words.

"It's nearly evening." His glance darted past me into the room, then returned. "It is time for you to learn your speech. And to change into something appropriate."

His attention shifted, settling on Bonnie. I noticed a subtle change in his expression—something evaluative, edged with disapproval—passed over his features.

"They also told me she'd be here," he said, then, lowering his voice for my ears alone, "Alpha Lysander, I don't believe growing closer to the girl is wise."

"If we're going to use her," I replied, "the very least I can offer is decency."

"We still cannot say with any certainty that she had no hand in this," he said. "And the last thing you should be doing right now is growing more sympathetic toward her. Sympathy clouds judgment, Alpha Lysander, especially tonight of all nights. With what needs to be done."

"Drop it," I said. "If dressing up and memorizing a speech is what you need from me, I have no objection to doing that."

"She'll need to come as well," he said, nodding toward Bonnie. "She has to be prepared for her role tonight."

Something cold gathered in my gut at the word he chose. Role. The syllable hung between us, reducing her to a pawn in a game whose rules kept shifting, while she waited, silent, just out of his reach and well within mine.

"Her part as the sacrificial lamb," he added. Beside me, Bonnie went motionless, her presence suddenly sharper, as if bracing for the next move.

To heal a Rogue

BONNIE

The words hung in the air—sacrificial lamb—uttered with such offhand detachment that, for a moment, I could have mistaken them for a scheduling note, some triviality tossed between wardrobe changes. Yet hearing them spoken with that flat, businesslike tone forced the truth into focus, sharp and unwelcome. For the past hour, I had rehearsed my lines for Lysander, insisting I wanted to clear my name honestly, that I would endure any ceremony, all in the name of finding out the truth, and that I not be made an even bigger enemy number one. I had tried to make each declaration sound steady, as if conviction alone might shield me.

But as dusk pressed against the windows, my practiced composure began to unravel. Beneath the stillness I wore for Lysander, anxiety trembled like a current I could not quiet. Fear settled low in my chest, icy and insistent, refusing to be banished by willpower or pride.

Lysander's gaze flicked toward me. I felt it, the weight of his scrutiny, and forced my features into blandness before he could decipher anything raw beneath the surface.

"Let's just get this over with," he said, his voice clipped, as if efficiency might spare us both. "She has to use here, though."

A flicker of disbelief crossed the elder's face as Lysander named his mother's old quarters. The silence that followed was not empty but taut as wire. When the realization settled, the elder's jaw clenched, and a choked sound escaped him—an inelegant, wounded protest that barely broke the surface before he mastered himself.

"And you would have us defile her memory?" His voice carried the weight of years, eyebrows arching in silent censure, as if the very air between them might fracture under the pressure of his disappointment."

I don't mind," Lysander replied, unflinching.

A muscle worked in the elder's cheek, mouth compressed to a bloodless line. At last, he inclined his head—a gesture that held no deference, only resignation. "If that is your wish, we will oblige."

With a sharp snap of his fingers, the elder summoned the Omegas. They materialized in the doorway, their arrival so swift it seemed they had been holding their breath just beyond the threshold. Lysander's nod permitted them entry, and they moved inside—silent, practiced, the air shifting with the scent of soap and starch. The elder's attention returned to Lysander, his eyes unreadable.

"This way, Your Majesty." The words emerged measured, each syllable placed with the care of someone reluctant to accept what he could not refuse.

At the threshold, Lysander paused. His eyes found mine, unspoken words threading the space between us, and his voice dropped to a murmur meant only for me. "You know how to reach me if you need to."

The elder's gaze sharpened as Lysander spoke, quick calculation flickering across his features before he smoothed them into impassivity. Lysander's words had been careful, ambiguous, hinting at the mate bond without naming it outright. I watched the elder, willing him not to see too much, unsettled by how little escaped his notice.

I inclined my head in silent assent. Lysander lingered an instant, as if caught between duty and something more fragile, then slipped out, the door closing with a muted finality that left the room altered in his absence.

The Omegas exchanged a look among themselves the moment he was gone. One stepped forward, older than the rest, carrying herself with the particular authority of someone used to being obeyed.

"We'll start with a bath," she said.

"I can do that myself, actually," I said.

She stepped closer, her smile thin and unmoved. "I'm sure you could do plenty of things, rogue. But we were tasked with this, and we will do it. It's our part. We know justice will prevail. So do not worry. We will do it well and with a smile on our face."

I swallowed whatever argument I had left. There was no point wasting it on people who believed, genuinely and completely, that they were doing something righteous.

The bath came next.

The water was too hot.

Their hands were too rough, scrubbing until my skin stung and glowed pink beneath their relentless attention. Every pass of the brush through my hair caught on another knot, and every snag earned an impatient tug instead of any attempt at gentleness.

"Hold still," one of them muttered. "You're making it worse."

"I am holding still," I replied.

"Could've fooled me."

The younger Omega working on my hair leaned closer, squinting as another lock slipped through her fingers.

"Huh."

"What?"

She smirked.

"The carpet matches the drapes."

A few of the others snorted.

"I've been wondering that since she got exposed," another chimed in. "How come her hair's practically white, but her eyelashes and eyebrows are dark? Shouldn't they match?"

"Maybe she paints them."

"With what?" the first girl laughed. "Ash?"

"I've seen stranger."

She gave another sharp yank with the comb.

"Ow," someone mocked under their breath before giggling.

"Honestly, it's a shame," the younger Omega went on. "The platinum thing is striking, but the dark lashes almost make it look... fake."

"I think it makes her look odd."

"I think it makes her look expensive," another countered. "Like one of those fancy Lunas who always seem too pretty to be real."

"Pretty doesn't do her much good now."

More laughter followed.

I let every word drift past me without catching on anything.

They thought they were clever. Thought they'd discovered some irresistible little mystery, some harmless joke at my expense.

I didn't have enough left in me to care.

They dried me off next.

Warm towels chased away the water, though not the chill that had settled somewhere beneath my skin. They brushed my hair until every knot surrendered, until the platinum strands fell in a smooth, gleaming curtain down my back.

Then came the dress.

One of the Omegas held it up while another helped me into it. The fabric slipped over my skin like liquid, crimson and almost weightless. It clung to every curve without resistance, technically concealing me while revealing far too much beneath its sheer layers. There was no modesty in its design. Only intention.

They fastened the last clasp and stepped back.

"It fits perfectly."

"I told you red was the right choice."

"It brings out her sinister eyes."

The comments passed between them with quiet satisfaction, like artisans admiring a finished commission rather than women dressing another woman for judgment.

Shoes followed.

Delicate things with impossibly thin straps that wrapped around my ankles, beautiful enough to display and impractical enough to remind me they hadn't been chosen for comfort.

The head Omega circled me once before clicking her tongue.

"Something's missing."

She crossed the room, opened a lacquered case, and withdrew a tube of deep crimson lipstick.

"Lift your chin."

I did.

She applied it with practiced precision, taking her time as though every stroke mattered.

As she painted it on, I said, "I'm apparently about to be handed a rank supposedly worthy of whatever crime they think I committed. So why does this feel like I'm being dressed up to be sold instead?"

"A breeder has to look the part," she said, without even glancing up from my mouth.

"Bring the jewelry," she added, and the room erupted into soft laughter, several of the younger women covering their mouths as they giggled among themselves.

It grated against something raw in me, that laughter, but I reminded myself it was performance. All of it. A show staged for an audience that wanted to see the crown handle its scandal with strength. I watched them continue, jaw tight, as a sack was carried in and set down near my feet.

From it came restraints. Metal, cold and heavy, shaped for wrists. And a collar, thinner, meant for a neck.

I stood so fast the chair scraped hard against the floor.

"In what world..." I said, my voice cracking sharp through the room, "does that belong on a person?"

The head Omega looked at me like I'd asked something faintly amusing.

"Surely you didn't think you'd look like a bride," she said.

She reached for the collar herself, turning it over once in her hands before offering it toward me with something almost like satisfaction.

"A slave has to look like a slave."

To heal a Rogue

LYSANDER

The elder led me down a corridor I hadn't walked in years, and it took me a moment to realize where we were actually headed. My stomach dropped slightly when the doors finally opened onto my uncle's chambers, the steward already inside, working a garment bag open across the foot of the bed. Burgundy fabric spilled out from beneath the tissue paper, close enough to the color Bonnie had chosen that I felt something small and warm move through my chest despite everything else pressing down on it.

Two more elders appeared in the doorway before I'd even crossed the threshold. One of them held out a leather pad with several pages clipped inside.

"You'll need to memorize this," he said.

I took it and flipped through the first page, scanning the careful, formal language, then looked back up at the three of them standing shoulder to shoulder like a small tribunal.

"There's clearly something else you want to say," I said. "So say it."

They exchanged a glance among themselves, the kind that always preceded bad news dressed up in careful phrasing.

"There's been word," the first one said, "that you struck a sentinel over the girl. That you and your cousin came to blows because of the matter as well." His eyes were steady on mine. "Tonight is critical, Alpha Lysander. If there is anything we should know about what you believe you can and cannot do where she's concerned, this is the moment to say it."

"The crown is at its most vulnerable right now," the second added. "Strength must be visible. There will already be questions about legitimacy, even with the will read aloud and witnessed. You'll need to prove you deserve that seat, not simply that you were handed it."

"You have nothing to worry about," I said. "Is that all?"

The third elder folded his hands in front of him. "We still don't fully understand why the late King changed his succession so abruptly. It's clear it has something to do with his son. Perhaps his relationship with the Queen as well, given that she's currently being cared for in some run-down healer's outpost instead of the royal infirmary here." He paused deliberately. "There were also several deaths among the healers in this house weeks back. Deaths the King himself signed off on."

Something cold moved through me at that.

"He did?" I said. Because such cruelty did not sound like him.

They exchanged another look, quieter this time, and way more weighted.

"All of this leads some of us to suspect," the first elder said, "that your cousin may be dangerous. That he could have had a hand in what happened to the King."

"I won't lie to you," I said. "That's part of why I accepted this. I'm glad I'm not the only one who's noticed his behavior. But I don't want us building conclusions out of assumptions alone."

"You were close to your uncle in his final hours," the second said. "Close enough that you were there when he named you heir that same night. Did he tell you anything? Anything at all that might explain what's happening now?"

I thought of the word infertile, spoken quietly in a library that now smelled permanently of blood. I thought of how little I actually trusted these three men standing in front of me, how carefully they'd need to be handled before I gave them anything that might be turned into a weapon against either Johann or myself.

"No," I said.

They studied me a moment longer, then nodded to each other, some silent agreement passing between them.

"Alpha Prince Johann will be your greatest threat tonight," the first said. "Be wary of him and mentally prepare for whatever he might attempt."

"I would like to see him try."

"We do hope Beta Bradley arrives tonight," the second added, "after your speech, once you've been properly presented. The Elder Circle will need to convene for your initiation."

"I've never heard of any initiation," I said. "What is that about?"

"You'll learn of it in due time."

The steward cleared his throat from where he stood beside the bed. "I've finished steaming your attire, Alpha Lysander. I can assist you in dressing whenever you're ready."

"I need to bathe first," I said.

"I can help with that as well."

"Yeah... I'd like to be alone to shower," I said, and something in my tone must have carried enough finality that none of them argued further.

They filed out one by one, murmuring their goodbyes, leaving me standing in the middle of a room that had belonged to a dead man only a day ago. I looked at the steamed burgundy fabric hanging from the wardrobe door, then let my eyes drift over the rest of the room, the heavy furniture, the cold hearth, the faint impression still visible in the carpet where a chair had once stood before someone dragged it away.

I felt like a fraud. Usurping Uncle Cornelius's own chambers, stepping into a space still soaked in the memory of him, while I hadn't even decided yet whether I actually wanted any of this.

But evening was close now, and there wasn't time to sit with that discomfort properly. I stripped out of my clothes and walked into the adjoining bathroom, turning the shower on and letting the water run hot before I stepped beneath it.

Standing there, steam curling up around me, my mind kept circling back to what the elders had said.

Dead healers.

Healers my own uncle had apparently signed off on killing.

Why? Was it simply to protect the secret of his infertility? To bury the truth so deep that no one alive could ever confirm it independently?

That didn't sound like the uncle I remembered.

But then again, I was beginning to understand that royal wolves and empathy rarely occupied the same room for long. Every layer I peeled back from this power revealed something else rotted underneath it, some new cruelty dressed up as necessity, and I was starting to wonder if there was any version of my uncle that hadn't been capable of exactly the kind of ruthlessness everyone kept implying that I needed to embody.

I let the water run over my face and made myself a quiet promise. Whatever had happened to those healers, whatever secret they'd died with or at least the reason for why they had to die, I intended to find out before the night was finished with me.

I had a sneaking suspicion that it was all connected.

To heal a Rogue

LYSANDER

The steward and two attendants worked over me in near silence, fastening layer after layer of dark burgundy fabric threaded through with gold at the collar and cuffs, until I barely recognized the shape looking back at me in the mirror. Heavier fabric than I was used to. Stiffer collar. A weight to it that had nothing to do with the material itself.

My eyes caught the throne through the open doorway leading into the adjoining hall, tall and carved, gold catching the last of the afternoon light through the windows.

"Am I meant to sit in that tonight?" I asked.

"No, Alpha Lysander," one of the attendants said, tucking a final pin into place at my shoulder. "We do not even use that anymore. If there is anytime it will be of use, that will be for your formal coronation. Tonight you'll stand as regent before the visiting court."

"You look every part the King already," the steward said, stepping back to survey his work with something close to pride. "The Lunas and Alphas gathered in the great hall will have no choice but to acknowledge you the moment you walk through those doors."

"With everything we've arranged," one of the elders added from near the door, "I see no reason anything should go awry tonight."

"What about the girl?" I asked.

She'd been shielding the bond for the better part of an hour now, and the silence of it sat uneasy in my chest, a held breath I couldn't release.

"You'll see her in the great hall," the elder said smoothly. "She's perfectly fine I am sure."

Another elder held up the leather pad from earlier. "Have you gotten your lines?"

"I've scanned through it," I said. "I'm not particularly fond of it."

"Oh... Why is that?"

"It sounds pretentious," I said. "Not like anything I would actually say."

"That's rather the point, Alpha Lysander," the first elder said, not unkindly, though the words landed with a weight that irritated me regardless. "You play the part until you fit the shape of it. Every King before you has done the same. It does not matter whether it sounds like you. It is important though that it sounds like a King or a would-be king would say it and this formula works."

"Well, unfortunately, that will never be me," I said.

They exchanged a glance, something resigned passing between them, before the elder simply nodded, as if deciding the argument wasn't worth having twice in one evening.

"Are we going, then, or not?"

They gave in, gathering themselves with the particular tension of people hoping for the best outcome from a situation they no longer fully controlled.

They hated it of course. But that was the best they could do. Hate it.

My heart was loud in my own ears as they led me out through the estate. A procession of royal retainers and sentinels fell in step behind us, their boots striking the stone floor in a rhythm that felt uncomfortably close to a countdown.

We left the main house and I was guided into a car that carried us the short distance toward the grand hall, passing rows of parked vehicles along the way. There were crests I recognized from a dozen tedious dinners glinting under the estate's outdoor lighting.

We stopped and so did the fleet of cars behind me. Sentinels and retainers spilled out of the cars that had trailed behind mine, falling into formation, and I let myself be steered

forward, my pulse hammering steady beneath the weight of everything I was now wearing.

The doors of the grand hall opened, and I stepped through them into a sea of black.

Every visiting Alpha and Luna had come dressed in mourning. Every single one of them had rows of dark fabric stretching the length of the hall, and for a moment the sheer scale of it stole something out of my chest. Then my eyes caught on a face near the front, and something in me eased despite everything else pressing down.

Fia.

She smiled the moment she realized I'd found her, warm and familiar in a room otherwise full of strangers measuring me for weakness. Her mate, Cian stood beside her, and when he noticed where my attention had landed, he draped an arm loosely over her shoulder, and I nearly scoffed out loud at the transparency of it.

I hadn't expected Skollrend to make the journey at all. They were nuring parents after all.

But this was good.

She'd been the one who told me I'd find my mate, months before any of this happened, and if anyone in this hall might know more about what my uncle's death actually meant, it would be her. Perhaps even something useful for whatever mess was still unfolding around Bonnie.

I stepped forward, and the room bowed as one.

It still didn't sit right in my chest, watching that many powerful people fold themselves in deference toward me. But they rose again, and I cleared my throat, ready to begin.

That was when the doors behind me opened.

The elders turned first, and I followed a half second later, watching Johann step through them dressed in midnight blue trimmed with a gold royal pin at his collar, looking healthier and more composed than I'd seen him look in years. I hated admitting it, even silently, but my cousin looked genuinely magnificent.

Murmurs rippled through the hall immediately.

Only the King, or the man standing regent in his place, was permitted color tonight. Everyone else wore black, the culture demanding visible grief from every guest except the one meant to carry the crown forward. Johann knew that as well as I did. Better, probably. This was calculated, staged specifically to cause exactly the reaction now spreading through the room in whispers behind raised hands.

He offered an apology to no one in particular and took a seat near the front, smiling at me the entire way down, and I ignored him even as the elders beside me muttered curses under their breath.

"You may begin, Alpha Lysander," one of them said, low and tight.

I cleared my throat again.

"My uncle," I said, my voice carrying out across the hall, "was a man many of you knew far longer than I did. Some of you sat beside him in council chambers decades before I was old enough to understand what any of it meant. You knew him as a King. I knew him, until very recently, simply as my uncle. A man who taught me that the moon goddess favors those who protect what's been placed in their hands, whether that's a pack, a family, or a single life that crosses their path."

The room settled into something attentive, a few heads nodding along.

"The De'Lune line has always claimed a particular closeness to Lady Selene," I continued. "My uncle carried that closeness with him in everything he did. In how he ruled. In how he treated those beneath him." I let that land, watching a few faces soften. "He did not deserve what happened to him in his own library, in his own home, surrounded by people meant to protect him."

I felt the room still further, grief settling back over it properly now, and I pressed forward into the part I'd been dreading since the moment I first read the elders' prepared lines.

"Tonight," I said, "there is someone who will be brought before you. Someone accused of ending his life." I kept my voice even, though something in my chest had started to twist.

"I would ask that this room extend the kind of judgment my uncle himself valued. Clear eyes. Patience. A willingness to see the full truth before—"

The shift in the room was immediate.

Faces that had softened moments ago hardened again, confusion and displeasure rippling outward from the front rows, and I saw Johann lean back in his seat, satisfaction spreading slow and unmistakable across his face. He turned slightly toward the crowd beside him, murmuring something I couldn't hear, mocking me without needing a single word directed my way.

One of the elders standing just behind me cleared his throat sharply, a warning disguised as a cough.

I felt the weight of every expectation in that room pressing down at once, felt the careful script I'd been handed hours ago waiting in my mind, the version meant to project strength instead of mercy, meant to prove the throne hadn't weakened the moment my uncle's body hit that library floor.

I let the silence settle before speaking again.

"Do not mistake restraint for weakness," I said, my voice carrying to every corner of the hall. "The throne of the Alpha King has endured wars, betrayals, rebellions, and bloodshed long before any of us drew our first breath. It has never survived because it rushed to anger. It survived because it dealt justice with an unwavering hand."

My gaze swept across the gathering.

"And to the one who was responsible for my uncle's murder, you will stand on these grounds tonight and come to realize that your belief and will is hopeless. No wall will hide you. No false title or rebel and rogue will shield you. Not even the goddess will save you from the wrath of my good people. You will answer for what you have done before the Moon, before this kingdom, and before me."

Yells started coming. They agreed with this more. The elders had been right.

I struggled through the final line, the words feeling like stones in my mouth.

"Bring in the murderer for judgment!"

The doors at the far end of the hall opened.

Bonnie was shoved through them, stumbling forward into the light, and my vision went red at the edges the instant I saw what covered her.

Chains. Wrapped around her wrists, looped at her throat, gleaming under the chandeliers in a way that made my entire body lock rigid with the effort of not crossing that hall and tearing every link of them apart with my bare hands.

To heal a Rogue

JOHANN (This Chapter begins right before the events in the great hall)

My dresser regarded the midnight blue jacket with open unease. The valet had laid everything else out with practiced precision, boots polished until they reflected the morning light, gloves folded into perfect symmetry, the silver clasp resting exactly where it belonged. Only the jacket remained untouched, balanced between his hands as though the fabric itself carried a sentence of death.

When I reached for it, he did not let go immediately.

His fingers lingered.

"Whose side are you on?" I asked.

The question landed harder than I'd intended. His eyes snapped to mine, widening with alarm, and whatever protest had been forming died before it reached his tongue.

"Yours, my prince. Always."

"Then give it to me."

His grip loosened.

"But..." His voice dropped to a whisper. "This is wrong."

I slipped one arm into the sleeve.

"Wrong?"

"Cultural law demands that only the regent of the next king wears color during the mourning period." His gaze flickered toward the jacket as though unable to look at me directly. "Everyone else wears black until the coronation."

"I wasn't asking for a history lesson."

"No, Your Highness."

He surrendered the jacket.

The heavy fabric settled across my shoulders with reassuring weight, the deep midnight blue swallowing the sunlight instead of reflecting it. It fit as though it had been tailored for this exact moment, sharp enough to command attention, understated enough that no one could accuse me of dressing for celebration.

The valet moved automatically to straighten the cuffs.

His hands betrayed him.

The faint tremor running through his fingers might have escaped anyone else, but I noticed everything. Fear had a way of revealing itself in the smallest betrayals.

"The pin," I said.

He froze.

"I said the royal pin."

Another heartbeat passed before he crossed to the dresser. Opening the velvet case, he lifted the silver crest with almost painful care, holding it between thumb and forefinger as though touching it too firmly might burn him. His eyes darted toward the closed door, then the windows, then back to me.

He looked less like a servant dressing his prince and more like a man preparing evidence for his own execution.

He offered it silently.

I took it from him.

"I am still a prince," I said as I fastened the crest to my collar. The silver wolf caught the light, gleaming against the blue. "Whatever decision my father reached in his final, fevered hours doesn't rewrite my blood."

The pin clicked into place.

"My name hasn't changed."

The valet swallowed.

"Neither has yours," I continued. "So keep addressing me as you always have, keep bending your knee, and you'll survive this."

His shoulders lowered by a fraction. "Yes, Your Highness."

A knock interrupted the silence. It was three measured raps.

Neither of us moved at first.

"Open it." I eventually said to him.

The valet hurried toward the door, relief obvious in the speed of his steps. Escaping the room, even for a moment, was preferable to standing any longer beside a prince determined to invite scandal before the funeral had even begun.

The door swung inward.

He inhaled sharply.

The sound was small, almost swallowed, but unmistakable.

Before I could ask what had startled him, he was already bowing so deeply I wondered whether he intended to kiss the floor.

I looked past him.

It was Amaranthine.

She stood framed by the doorway, the corridor behind her washed in pale overhead light that outlined her silhouette before surrendering her to shadow. Black suited her in a way it suited no one else.

The gown traced clean, elegant lines without excess ornament, the simplicity making it all the more striking. Her dark red hair had been swept away from her face and pinned into an intricate arrangement that exposed the graceful curve of her neck. There was something different about her.

It was not she looked older. I had met up with her a few weeks back. But maybe it was the color she was in and the mood that played across her face.

The story it told was that the carefree girl who had once raced me barefoot through her father's gardens had been folded away beneath careful posture, measured breathing, and the quiet confidence of someone who had learned exactly how much of herself the world deserved to see.

For a heartbeat, I forgot why she was here.

Then I remembered.

"Come to help me grieve?" I asked, letting amusement soften the edges of my voice.

Her eyes traveled over me without haste.

From my boots, to the midnight blue jacket and then the silver crest resting proudly against my collar.

One perfectly sculpted eyebrow rose before she then spoke.

"You're not wearing black. That makes me think it is you who needs help in that department."

"Maybe," I said as I crossed the room and took her hand before she could pull it back.
"You, on the other hand, look phenomenal in it."

She smiled, brief and polite, before sliding her hand free of mine with a gentleness that somehow felt worse than if she'd yanked it away.

"I'm actually here to talk," she said.

"About what?"

"Us."

"What about us?"

She sighed, and something in the sound of it made my stomach drop before she'd said another word.

"On the way here," she said, "my father was talking. About my future."

I felt exactly where this was headed before she finished the sentence, and something cold settled into my chest.

"You cannot be serious."

"You haven't even heard me speak yet."

"I don't need to." I laughed, short and humorless, the sound scraping up out of my throat. "It's clear what's happening here. You want to end things with me now that I'm no longer in line for the seat."

She didn't say anything. Her silence was answer enough.

"So I'm right," I said.

"I'm so sorry, Johann." Her voice had gone soft, careful, the tone people used when they'd already decided something and were simply managing the fallout. "The engagement was never to you specifically. I was given to whoever stood next in line to the throne. And that would mean—"

My hand shot out before I'd finished processing the thought, closing around her arm, tighter than I meant to, tighter than I should have.

"You're hurting me," she gasped, and I barely registered it.

"You cannot be serious," I said again, my voice climbing. "You intend to pursue my cousin now? Just like that? Passed along like some inheritance clause?"

"That isn't what I'm doing," she said, wincing but holding her ground. "I'm merely following the written agreement between the De'Lunes and the Chontos. It was never personal, Johann."

To heal a Rogue

JOHANN

"Tell them to go to hell," I said. "Tell them you don't care about some old contract. Tell them you love me. The way I love you."

Her expression crumpled slightly, something pained and genuine crossing it.

"I cannot lie to you," she said. "I'm being decent by telling you this to your face instead of simply vanishing from your life without a word. I did love Lysander once, if we're being honest with each other tonight. I was supposed to be betrothed to the Askers first. You must remember that."

Silence swallowed the room.

Neither of us moved.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the valet lower his head, suddenly fascinated by the floor beneath his feet. He had become an unwilling witness to something no servant should ever hear.

He cleared his throat carefully.

"Your Highness..." he murmured. "If I may, I shall leave you both to speak privately."

He bowed and took a single cautious step toward the door.

"Stay where the fuck you are."

The words cracked through the room like a whip.

The valet stopped so abruptly his polished shoes scraped against the marble.

He froze.

One foot remained half-raised before he slowly set it back on the floor, every muscle in his body locking into rigid obedience. His face drained of what little color remained, and his hands folded tightly in front of him, trembling despite every effort to keep them still.

"Y... yes, Your Highness."

Only then did I turn back to Amaranthine.

She was staring at me.

"That engagement lasted five minutes," I said. "Lysander humiliated you and your entire family and it was spread across several pack territories. That's the whole reason you and I ended up paired together in the first place. So your father wouldn't spend the next decade furious about the insult." I let go of her arm and stepped back, my jaw tight. "He laughed in your face when that proposal was brought to him. Laughed, Amaranthine, because he was too busy chasing some invisible woman he'd convinced himself was his destiny."

"He was a child then. He's a man now," she said. "And he has a duty to the crown. I'm not breaking any law. I am in fact, honoring what my family agreed to. I'm keeping it."

I pressed her hand flat against my own chest.

"You're breaking my heart," I said.

She looked down at where our hands met, and something in her expression hardened, some resolve settling into place that told me exactly how this was going to end before she said another word.

"If your love was supposed to mean anything," she said quietly, "the goddess would have given us a fated bond. She didn't." She pulled her hand free. "There are also rumors circulating, Johann. About whether you had something to do with your father's death."

"Look at me," I said. "No. I did not."

She studied my face for a long moment, and whatever she found there wasn't enough to change her mind.

"I'm glad to hear you say that," she replied. "I truly am."

Her voice carried pity.

Pity.

It landed harder than accusation ever could.

"But it changes nothing."

She turned toward the door.

"No." The word left me before I'd thought it through.

Though, she kept walking.

I caught her wrist.

She stopped but did not turn around.

"Johann."

"No."

"Let go."

"You don't get to walk in here, further dismantle my life, and leave before I've even..." My voice faltered. "Before we've even fought for this."

"There is nothing left to fight for."

"There has to be."

She pulled against my grip.

I tightened it.

"Johann."

"Tell me this isn't what you want."

"It isn't about what I want."

"Then make it about what you want."

She finally turned to face me.

"I am."

The certainty in her eyes unraveled something inside me.

"No," I whispered.

"You'll survive this."

"I don't want to survive it."

"I know."

She reached to pry my hand from her wrist.

Instead, I stepped closer. Too close.

"Johann..."

Before she could finish, I caught her face between my hands and kissed her.

It lasted only a heartbeat.

She shoved hard against my chest, twisting away. When I refused to release her immediately, her teeth sank sharply into my lower lip.

Pain exploded through my mouth.

I recoiled with a curse, one hand flying to the spot. Warm blood smeared across my fingertips.

"What the hell?"

She stumbled back the instant I let go, breathing hard. The back of her hand swept violently across her mouth as though trying to erase the contact altogether.

Disgust flashed openly across her face.

"That," she said, her voice shaking with anger, "was repulsive."

Blood dripped from my lip onto the polished floor.

I stared at her.

She stared back.

For the first time since she'd entered the room, there wasn't an ounce of sympathy left in her expression.

"You've just proven I made the right decision."

She stepped around me.

I didn't reach for her again.

The valet remained rooted exactly where I'd ordered him to stand, his face pale, his eyes fixed firmly on the floor, as though pretending not to have witnessed any of it might somehow spare him.

"Goodbye, Johann," she said, as she walked out, her heels clicking steady against the floor, not once looking back.

I stood there for a moment, staring at the empty doorway, something building behind my ribs that had nowhere left to go.

Then I let it out.

I swept my arm across the dresser, sending the pin case and a row of colognes crashing to the floor, the glass shattering against stone. I grabbed the nearest chair and hurled it against the wall, watching one of its legs splinter clean off on impact, and I kept going, tearing through the room in a fury that felt righteous even as it destroyed everything within reach.

The Valet fled the moment the first bottle hit the ground, wise enough not to linger.

When there was nothing left standing to break, I stood in the wreckage and laughed. Loud and unhinged.

The sound bounced off walls that no longer held anything worth protecting.

"You have to go down now, cousin," I thought. "Whatever it takes. Whatever it costs. You will not walk away from tonight with everything intact."

I straightened my jacket, brushed a shard of glass from my sleeve, and made my way toward the great hall.

Chapter 47: The Breeder shame

BONNIE

I heard the speech through the doors before they ever opened for me.

His voice carried, muffled through wood and stone, and I recognized the shape of it even distorted. He'd started strong. Eulogizing his uncle, invoking the goddess, painting the late King Cornelius as some paragon of moon-blessed leadership. He was trying. I'd give him that much, whatever else happened tonight. But he was one man standing against something far larger than himself, a machine built over centuries to grind people like me into something useful and then discard the remains. I found myself doubting, for one brief and traitorous second, whether letting him abandon his original plan to defend me outright had been the right call after all.

Then a sentinel's hand slammed into my shoulder blade from behind.

"Bitch," he said, low and mean. "You're up."

The doors opened.

I walked through them and let the shield around the bond fall away completely, no longer caring what he felt from me now that there was nothing left to hide. The rage hit me instantly, sharp and immediate, radiating off him the moment his eyes found the chains at my wrists and throat. He wasn't even trying to hide it. Any fool watching his face closely enough would have seen exactly what was happening between us, and I silently begged

him, through whatever thread connected us, to just let this moment pass without giving Johann or anyone else more ammunition than they already had.

He pulled it back. Barely. Enough that his expression settled into something colder, more composed, though I could still feel the fury simmering underneath it like a held breath.

The sentinels flanking me marched me forward until I stood in front of the entire gathered court, every black-clad face in that hall turned toward me with an expression ranging from disgust to open hatred. It was unnerving, standing there, feeling that much collective loathing pointed at a single body.

Then my eyes caught on someone near the front who wasn't looking at me that way at all.

A woman, seated beside a man I vaguely recognized, offered me the faintest, kindest smile I'd seen since this entire nightmare began. There was something strange about her, something I couldn't quite name, a soft blue sheen that seemed to hang around her like light refracted through water. I wondered, briefly and absurdly, if I'd finally started losing my mind from stress alone. But the impression lingered, calming somehow, even in a room full of people who wanted to see me suffer.

Lysander continued.

"This is my uncle's murderer," he said, his voice carrying to every corner of the hall. "A rogue who infiltrated this palace, and despite being given the privilege to serve, chose to cruelly end his life."

I watched several heads nod along.

"The standing position of rogues has always been that they stand against prejudice," he continued. "But leaders like my uncle worked to ensure the caste system carried less cruelty than it once did. That lower ranks retained legal rights. Personhood. The chance to shape their own futures." His eyes swept the crowd. "Some of you here are even married to Omegas."

He felt insane making the comparison. But he was following some script, and he was following it well.

I watched several people turn instinctively toward a handful of couples scattered through the hall, but the majority of eyes landed on the woman with the strange blue sheen. I wondered if she'd married up from an Omega designation, if that was why the room had turned toward her so naturally. She didn't seem bothered by the attention at all, and the man beside her, someone I now fully recognized distantly as the Alpha of Skollrend, took her hand without hesitation.

She was the sister of the girl that Johann mentioned that Lysander murdered. She did not seem remotely pissed at him, though.

"But you," Lysander said, and his voice hardened again as they broke my complicated train of thought, "rogue, will now know what true oppression looks like."

I felt something in my chest tighten.

"Death is far too kind for the likes of you."

His voice wavered slightly on that line, just enough that I caught it through the bond as clearly as I heard it with my ears. I wondered if it would help to turn toward him, to somehow signal that this was fine, that this was simply the performance we'd agreed he had to give. I decided against it. Instead I pushed calm through whatever bond connected us, steady and deliberate, hoping he'd feel it and find enough footing to finish.

He continued.

"You will have no true identity moving forward," he said. "No rights. No inheritance. No autonomy. No place within this pack's proper order." His jaw tightened visibly now. "You will be nothing but a vessel of pleasure. A breeder."

The murmurs started low, rippling outward from the front rows, and then the yells of agreement rose up loud and sudden, more from the men in the crowd than the women, though a few of those joined in as well.

"As I have spoken it aloud," Lysander said, "it becomes law. Before the goddess. Before my people." He paused, drawing in a visible breath, something flickering behind his eyes that I recognized as pure restraint. "Till the end of your days."

Applause broke out across the hall, scattered at first and then swelling, a handful of women rising to join the men already on their feet.

Then Johann's voice cut through it from the front row.

"My father would be proud," he said, standing, "that his regent, his favorite nephew, is taking such a stance. Such a show of strength."

"Thank you, cousin," Lysander said, tight and clipped. "But now is not the time."

"I agree," Johann said, though nothing in his expression suggested agreement at all. "But as I look at that murderer's face, I see nothing but a hardened heart. Death does not frighten her. Neither, I suspect, does this." He let his gaze drag slowly over me, deliberate and cruel. "I believe she should be humiliated here. Stripped and taken like the breeder she is, right now, to send a proper message."

The elders near the front cut in immediately.

"Your Highness," one of them said sharply, "this is neither the time nor the place."

Johann turned to the crowd instead, ignoring them entirely.

"Am I right?" he called out.

Silence held for a moment, and then a voice broke it from somewhere near the front.

"The Prince has a point."

The man rose, and I recognized him then, some distant echo of a resemblance clicking into place. Queen Edelina's father. His support was so transparently for his own grandson that it should have landed as nothing but obvious flattery, and yet the crowd shifted anyway, murmurs picking up again, some faces turning to nod along with him.

Lysander opened his mouth, and I felt the flood of rage building in him through the bond, ready to spill over into something neither of us could take back in front of this many witnesses.

That was when a man stood up near the middle of the hall.

He looked directly at me, and something about his stillness made every hair on my arms rise before he even spoke.

"Comrade," he said, his voice carrying clean through the sudden quiet, "I would never let a fate worse than death befall you. For us rogues, you will be a martyr. You deserve a kinder end."

To heal a Rogue

BONNNIE

For one long, disjointed second, I genuinely thought he was talking to me the way a person talks to someone they respect. So naturally, the question in my heart was, was this dude talking to me? My brain simply refused to process the shape of what came next fast enough.

He pulled a gun from beneath his jacket and fired.

The world went sideways.

Two shots cracked out in rapid succession, one from my left, one from my right, and several Alphas surged up out of their seats toward the man, and it was only then, in the chaos of bodies scrambling, that I recognized him properly. The scar was gone from the corner of his mouth, but the rest of his face matched the man I'd seen in the library last night, standing over King Cornelius's body with a gun in his hand.

The bullet meant for me never reached me.

Lysander shoved me hard, his whole body slamming into mine, and I went sprawling sideways across the floor, my shoulder cracking against stone, chains rattling loudly against the ground. I didn't have time to process the impact before I registered what had happened in the space where I'd been standing.

He hadn't had time to dodge himself.

I watched the bullet punch through the side of his throat, watched blood erupt outward in a violent spray of crimson that painted the air between us before it hit the floor, watched his body jolt with the impact, his hand flying up to his own neck on instinct even as his legs buckled beneath him.

Everything in me went white and hollow at once.

"Lysander!"

The scream tore out of me before I'd even decided to make a sound, raw and broken, and I scrambled across the floor toward him, chains dragging heavy against stone, my hands shaking too hard to be useful the second I reached him.

Blood poured from his throat in thick, dark waves, soaking into the collar of his burgundy regalia, spreading fast across fabric that had been chosen, hours ago, in a room that suddenly felt like it belonged to another lifetime entirely.

His eyes found mine, glassy, wide, panicked in a way I'd never seen on him before, his mouth working uselessly around sounds that couldn't form past the wound tearing his throat apart.

"No," I said, my voice cracking apart entirely. "No, no, no, stay with me. Stay with me right now."

Around us, the hall had dissolved into complete chaos, sentinels grappling the shooter to the ground, screams and shouted orders overlapping into something I couldn't separate into individual voices, Alphas and Lunas scrambling back from their seats in a wave of black fabric and panic.

None of it mattered.

I pressed both hands against the wound at his throat, blood immediately soaking hot and slick between my fingers, and I felt the hum rise in my palms before I'd even consciously called for it, faster and more desperate than it had ever come before.

"Don't you dare," I said, my voice shaking violently now, tears blurring everything in front of me. "Don't you dare leave me after everything. Not like this. Not because of me."

His hand found my wrist, weak, trembling, but there, holding on with whatever strength he had left, and somewhere beneath the blood and the panic and the chaos exploding around us, I felt the bond between us pulse once, faint and desperate, still holding, still alive.

I also heard the elders somewhere behind me, screaming for healers, their voices tangled together in a panic that did nothing to speed up time.

There wasn't time.

I'd seen this bullet before. Felt what it did to my own body in that library, the way it refused to heal the way ordinary wounds healed, the way it sat in the flesh like poison rather than injury. This was the same material that had killed the King, the same slow, deliberate cruelty, and Lysander's throat was already turning a shade of grey beneath the blood that had nothing to do with the loss of it and everything to do with what the metal and whatever else was in it, itself, was doing to him from the inside.

He had seconds. Maybe less.

My mother's face flashed behind my eyes, sudden and merciless, the memory of her throat opening under a Beta's claws while I knelt frozen and useless beside her. I remembered the promise I'd made to myself and to her in that cell, that I would never let my gift be used as leverage, nor show it. That I would rather let someone die in front of me than hand over what I was to people who only wanted me for the blue light that regularly burned in my palms.

And for one single, ugly heartbeat, something dark and small curled up from the bottom of my chest.

If he died, the bond died with him. No more chains. No more mate. No more throne, no more crown, no more court full of strangers deciding what my body was worth in front of an audience.

The thought was gone before it finished forming, burned away by something far louder and far more insistent screaming through every part of me. I didn't want him gone. I wanted him alive, breathing, arguing with me in some corridor about locks and trust and stupid rhymes, and the wanting was so fierce it frightened me more than the bullet had.

"No," he said, or tried to, the word barely more than a rasp forced past a ruined throat, his hand tightening weakly around my wrist like he already knew exactly what I was about to do and was trying, with the last of whatever strength he had left, to stop me.

I'd already decided.

The healers wouldn't make it in time. I could almost hear their footsteps somewhere distant, too far, chaos slowing everyone down, and I was the only thing currently touching him with any hope of doing something about it.

I hadn't been able to save the King.

I would not fail this one, too.

"Sorry," I said, and I meant it for more than just this moment, meant it for every wall I'd built and every promise I'd made to keep this part of myself buried and safe.

Then I let go.

Both my hands ignited at once, a blue so violent and bright it swallowed the color out of everything around us, washing over the stone floor, over his ruined throat, over my own trembling fingers until I couldn't tell where the light ended, and my skin began. The hum

inside me didn't rise gently this time. It tore loose, wild and enormous, more than I had ever called forward in my entire life, more than I even knew I had.

A scream ripped out of me, raw and involuntary, my whole body arching under the force of whatever was moving through me and into him, and somewhere in the blinding wash of light I heard the entire hall go silent around the sound of it.

To heal a Rogue

LYSANDER

The rage had barely settled in my chest from seeing her in fucking chains when I noticed it.

The gash at her temple, the one that Sentinel's rifle had left, the one I'd watched them clean with my own hands in that infirmary, was gone.

Not scarred over or maybe even the tell that it was still healing. It was gone, as if it had never happened at all.

My eyebrow rose before I could stop it.

I forced my attention back to the words the elders had drilled into me, my voice carrying out over the crowd as I laid out the fate they'd decided for her. Still, underneath the performance my mind kept circling back to that missing wound, worrying at it the way a tongue worries a loose tooth.

She was an Omega. She'd told me that herself, in the corridor, her voice flat with old resignation. That alone did nothing to explain plenty. What it did explain was that it was the reason half the rogue population existed at all, Omegas fleeing packs that treated them as barely more than furniture.

But an Omega healed slowly, even slower than any other designation, no faster, no better. No version of ordinary biology closed a wound that size in the space of an afternoon.

My mind kept dragging me backward through everything she'd told me since that stairwell.

Like her mother being murdered by my late father's now dead Beta. I'd assumed it was punishment for some broken rule, some infraction against Lily of the Valley's then rigid order. But what if it hadn't been about rules at all? What if it had been about something else entirely, something her mother had died protecting.

Bonnie had survived. She'd run, young enough that survival alone should have been remarkable, let alone escape.

My thoughts snagged hard on the one obsession that had apparently outlived my own father, carried across his entire life and into whatever conversation he'd had with me in his room when I had decided to take his life to protect someone I deeply cared about.

Healers. The healers from the age of legend, the ones practically wiped from existence generations ago, spoken of now mostly in myth and warning.

Johann's words came back to me too, unbidden. The reason half this court couldn't trust Bonnie's story. The simple, glaring fact that she had walked out of that library alive when a King twice her strength had not.

I looked out across the crowd, toward Fia, some question forming in the back of my mind as I finished the sentencing. The word had not even settled before my dear cousin, Johann's voice, cut through everything, dropping his poison into the room.

"...Death does not frighten her. Neither, I suspect, does this." He let his gaze drag slowly over me, deliberate and cruel. "I believe she should be humiliated here. Stripped and taken like the breeder she is, right now, to send a proper message."

He wanted her assaulted publicly, wanted the show of it, and his grandfather rose to back him, and I filed that away with cold, deliberate precision. Once this settled, I intended to demand an oath from Johann.

A DNA test alongside it, something undeniable enough to strip whatever claim he still imagined he held to that throne, bastard or not.

I was done being patient with him.

Then a man stood up near the middle of the hall, and something in his stillness, in the deliberate calm of his voice, made every instinct in me sharpen at once.

"Comrade," he said. "I would never let a fate worse than death befall you. For us rogues, you will be a martyr. You deserve a kinder end."

His hand slid toward his pocket, and I almost tasted bloodlust.

I felt it before I fully understood what I was looking at.

Some primal recognition firing through me faster than conscious thought could keep up.

I moved.

I didn't think about how it looked, didn't think about the elders or the crowd or the crown that would soon be balanced precariously on my shoulders. I thought only of getting my body between hers and whatever was about to happen. The metal flashed. The bang cracked out loud enough to shatter the stillness of the entire hall.

I made it in time to save her.

I did not make it in time to save myself.

Pain exploded through my throat, hot and total, stealing the air right out of my lungs before I even registered falling. The floor came up hard beneath me.

I heard her scream my name.

Hell, Bonnie was there almost instantly, scrambling across the stone, chains dragging loud against the floor, and the look on her face would have earned a smile out of me on any other night.

She'd been so guarded since the moment I dragged her out of that cell, careful and cold in all the ways that made sense given everything she'd survived. But there was nothing guarded in her face now. Just raw, unguarded terror, entirely for me.

I told myself I would be fine. I'd survived worse than this. It felt like a foolish thing to cling to even as I thought it, given that my vision had already started swimming at the edges and my back was growing slick and warm against the stone beneath me.

I wanted to say something. Something to calm her, something to keep that terror from tipping over into whatever came next. I couldn't find the words. My throat wouldn't cooperate, wouldn't do anything except leak heat down the front of my ruined collar.

Screaming surrounded us, layered and chaotic, and beneath all of it I felt something move through the bond, sharp and unmistakable.

Determination.

I wasn't certain my earlier suspicion had been right, that word healer sitting strange and enormous in my mind, but there was something in her eyes now that left no real room for doubt.

I can save you. That was what her whole face said, clear as if she'd spoken it aloud.

I reached for her hand and forced a whisper past what was left of my throat.

"No."

She didn't listen.

That terrified me more than the bullet had. I hadn't lived through the era when healers still existed openly, but I'd heard enough, absorbed enough secondhand horror from old stories and older grudges, to know exactly what happened to people who could do what she was apparently about to do, in front of an audience this large, this powerful, this hungry for anything that strengthened their standing.

My own father had been one of those.

To heal a Rogue

LYSANDER

If she did this here, in front of every visiting Alpha, every Luna, the entire Elder Circle watching with their own agendas sharpening behind their eyes, what would happen to her afterward? Could I actually protect her from what came next? She had already survived a life difficult enough for three lifetimes. I didn't want to hand her more of that. Not because of me.

"Sorry," I heard her say, and I tried to force the shape of a scream past my ruined throat, tried to tell her that whatever she thought she was about to do could not happen, not like this, not in front of all of them.

It was all hypothesis and speculation of course. But my gut was never wrong.

Then the light came.

A blue, brilliant and total glow exploded outward and swallowed my vision whole. I felt something pour back into me in its wake, vitality flooding through every part of my body that had gone cold and distant only seconds before.

When the light finally receded, she said, "I'm sorry I lied," and collapsed forward against my chest.

I couldn't move for a long moment. My body simply refused to process what had just happened to it, healed and whole and thrumming with borrowed strength.

Then the voices around us came rushing back in.

"Did she just—"

"Is she a healer? She healed him... We... We all saw that, right?"

"What in the goddess's name—"

"Who cares what she is," someone shouted over the rest. "Do you understand what this means?"

I sat up, gathering her into my arms as I rose, my clothes soaked through with my own blood, and the sight of me standing whole in front of them silenced most of the murmuring outright.

The look on Johann's face would have been priceless if the boy was not beginning to scare me.

"This procession is over," I said, my voice carrying despite everything my throat had just been through.

I turned to the nearest sentinels. "Put the attacker in custody. I want to interrogate him myself."

I started walking, cradling her against my chest, heading straight for my mother's old room without waiting for permission or ceremony. A few elders trailed after me, already trying to raise questions about the girl, about what had just happened, about what it meant for the court and the crown and every carefully constructed plan they'd built for tonight.

"Your Highness!" One Elder called after me. "You cannot simply remove the girl. She has just demonstrated an ability unseen for centuries."

"She requires examination," another elder said. "Immediately."

"Examination?" The third said. "We have fucking eyes. She is a healer from the age of legends."

"I'm certain I've made myself very clear," I said, without slowing.

That was all I needed to say before they all fell back.

I kept walking until I heard hurried footsteps behind me, light and quick, and I turned expecting another stubborn elder determined to argue with me despite everything. Instead I found Fia.

Her expression was apologetic before she'd said a single word.

"Did you see this coming?" I asked.

"All I saw were glimpses," she said. "But I believe this had to happen exactly the way it did."

"In front of practically the entirety of werewolf society?" I said. "There was a reason I needed to protect you from my father's obsession, Fia. He was open about his fixation with healers. There are plenty out there who are not, but will want her now, for exactly what she just showed them she can do."

"I'm sure you can protect her," Fia said. "I've seen what you're willing to do for the people you care about. You're going to be King, Lysander. That should be more than enough to make plenty of people fall in line."

"I didn't exactly want the throne," I said, a short laugh escaping me despite everything. "But more reasons keep appearing for why I should keep it anyway. I suppose I'm never actually escaping it."

"A rogue was even here tonight," I added. "Who knows what anyone actually saw, or what conclusions they'll draw from it. My whole show of strength turned out to be entirely useless. I was shot in front of every Alpha in this territory by a rogue nonetheless."

"You were saving your subject," Fia said. "And your mate."

"They don't know that," I said. "To everyone in that hall, I was simply saving a breeder."

Fia stepped closer and reached out, laying her hand gently against Bonnie's head. A soft blue glow spread beneath her palm, and Bonnie stirred slightly against my chest, some tension easing out of her unconscious frame.

Fia looked back up at me, something knowing settling into her expression.

"I don't think so," she said. "A healer of legend returns to this world, and the very first thing she does is save a regent, soon to be named Alpha King, a man who supposedly condemned her to a fate worse than death only minutes earlier." She smiled faintly. "If that isn't the goddess herself backing your claim to that throne, I don't know what is. And thank the goddess werewolf society happens to be as prejudiced as it is."

"I heard plenty of ugly talk about the girl on my way here tonight," she continued. "About how she insisted she didn't kill the Alpha King. I imagine the tide has turned rather dramatically now. Plenty of people will start wondering why a killer would be blessed with the source itself. Maybe, just maybe, she was never the killer at all." Her eyes met mine, steady and certain. "You can use that. Turn the narrative in her favor. Propaganda or whatever. You can save her from the breeder fate entirely, using the very story they just watched unfold in front of them."

I felt something loosen in my chest for the first time since that gunshot rang out.

"Thank you," I said.

"You saved me once," Fia said, stepping back. "I'm simply repaying the favor." She winked. "And of course, if your new healer ever needs help, you know where to find me."

Then she turned and walked away, leaving me standing in the corridor with Bonnie unconscious in my arms, blood drying stiff against my collar, and something that felt dangerously close to hope settling in beside everything else I now had to carry.