

To heal a Rogue

c 51-60

Chapter 51: Lose your sh*t

JOHANN

A healer.

The words wouldn't sit right in my head no matter how many times I turned them over. I stood frozen near the front row while chaos erupted around me, watching sentinels drag that rogue away in chains, and I could not make my mind accept what my own eyes had just shown me.

The girl was supposed to die tonight. That had been the entire point, the whole beautifully constructed collapse I'd spent hours arranging over the phone with a man too stupid to even aim properly. Lysander throwing himself in front of the bullet instead would have worked just as well, honestly. Better, in some ways. I remembered the exact shape of the smile that had started forming on my own face as I watched blood pour out of my cousin's throat, watched his legs give out beneath him, watched the crown I'd been denied bleed out on the floor of a hall meant to celebrate his rise.

Then that girl had put her hands over the wound and stitched him back together like it was nothing.

I was livid. Genuinely, thoroughly livid, in a way that made my hands ache from how tightly I'd curled them into fists at my sides.

Healers were supposed to be extinct. Gone. A footnote in old stories parents told their pups to make the past feel more magical than it actually was. That was the entire foundation of the world I'd grown up believing in, and now some rogue Omega playing dress up as a male retainer had just shattered it in front of every Alpha and Luna in this territory.

Behind me, a pair of idiot Alphas were already murmuring to each other, thrilled with the theory forming between them.

"If healers are back," one of them said, "there could be more of them hiding. Anywhere. Even in our own packs."

"We should check," the other said, half joking, half not. "Go through the whole roster. See if anyone's been hiding something interesting."

I walked away before I heard any more of it. My skin was already crawling with everything I'd just witnessed, and I didn't need their speculation adding to it.

Alpha Sterling caught me before I'd made it three steps.

He looked like he'd been dragged through something violent himself, his hands trembling, his eyes darting from corner to corner like the walls themselves might report him for treason.

"What do you plan to do now?" he said.

"You look like you're on drugs, grandfather," I said. "Stop shaking. Eyes are literally everywhere."

He forced himself still, visibly, his jaw working hard to steady itself. "I'm stable now." He leaned in, dropping his voice through his teeth. "That rogue was taken alive. He's going to talk."

"I really don't think so," I said. "His loyalties will stay in place if he wants what he agreed to do this for in the first place. And I'm certain they will hold."

"Rogues don't stand for anything, Johann," Sterling hissed. "That's exactly how they ended up rogues in the first place. They couldn't handle belonging to a pack structure. You think they'll handle standing firm for something as complicated as a revolution?" His eyes narrowed. "There's a reason they've always crawled along the ground and never quite managed to climb high enough to matter."

"I don't know," I said. "They're the reason this entire kingdom is currently a mess."

"Right," he said, something bitter twisting his mouth. "Because your mother built the avenue for it. They aren't smart, calculated, or talented enough to pull off something like a fucking assassination alone, and you know it."

"I have this handled."

"You'd better."

Something in his tone snapped whatever patience I had left clean in half.

"Moving forward," I said, low and precise, "never take that tone with me again." I stepped closer, close enough that he had to hold his ground or visibly retreat. "I know plenty now, about my own origins. You are not my grandfather. We are allies, at best, and in ranking, you are nothing close to my equal. So lower your eyes and your voice when you speak to me, and put that haughty tail between your pathetic legs."

He said nothing further. I walked past him without waiting to see how he took it.

I made my way down toward the dungeons, cutting through the still-dispersing crowd, catching pieces of conversation as I went that made my blood boil hotter with every step.

"Divine," an elderly Luna breathed. "The Lily of the Valley Alpha, named heir, and now a healer at his side. It's like something from the age of legends."

"You're thinking too small," the Alpha beside her replied. "A named heir that is not the Prince is rare enough. A healer is... impossible. To see both in the same night..." He shook his head. "The goddess herself must have blessed House Asker."

I could only chuckle.

They saw me then and went quiet immediately, dropping their eyes and their voices swallowing themselves whole the moment my presence registered.

I was furious by the time I reached the cells.

They wouldn't let me in.

"Move."

Neither sentinel budged.

"Your Highness," one of them began carefully, "the regent's orders..."

"A rogue walked into the royal hall and fired a weapon at the regent," I cut in. "He nearly assassinated the acting ruler of this kingdom in front of half the nobility."

Neither of them answered.

"The same rogue may very well be connected to my father's murder. Do you understand the magnitude of that?" My gaze shifted between them. "Every moment he sits in that cell without being questioned is another moment we lose."

The younger sentinel swallowed.

I pressed on before either of them could speak.

"I am not asking to execute him. I am asking to question him. Thoroughly. Personally. If there is even the slightest chance he is part of the bastards who orchestrated my father's death, then standing in my way is bordering on negligence."

The older sentinel lowered his head.

"The current regent has made his orders clear, Your Highness. No one is to enter." Though his voice shook as he said it. "We don't want to suffer the consequences of disobeying him."

Chapter 52: Prim and Proper

JOHANN

"I am your Prince," I said.

Both sentinels dropped to their knees at that, fear written plainly across their faces, and something in me almost softened at the sight of it.

"At least there's still some sense left in you," I said, moving toward the entrance.

The nearer sentinel swallowed hard.

Then, despite the tremor running through his arm, he lifted it across my path.

"I am sorry, Your Highness."

I stared at the hand blocking me.

"The regent is our commanding officer," he continued, forcing each word out as though he expected it to earn him an execution. "His orders take precedence over every other command until he withdraws them."

Silence settled between us.

Not *my* command.

His.

The sentinel kept his head lowered, too frightened to meet my eyes, yet somehow still willing to deny me.

The realization crawled beneath my skin.

Only yesterday, they would have moved before I even spoke.

Only yesterday, invoking my title would have ended the conversation.

Now two ordinary sentinels were apologizing while refusing me entry because Lysander had spoken first.

He hadn't merely survived the assassination.

He had become regent.

And in a single night, that title had given him something infinitely more dangerous than authority.

It had given other people permission to tell me no.

The sentinel's voice came again, quieter this time.

"We know how this must feel, but... we cannot disobey him, Your Highness."

I looked from one kneeling guard to the other.

Neither hated me. Neither wished to insult me.

They were simply doing their duty. But for some reason, that made it worse.

Something inside me gave way, and my hand struck his face before I'd consciously decided to raise it.

The crack echoed through the corridor.

His head snapped to the side, but he didn't cry out.

He simply remained on one knee.

I hit him again. Harder.

His lip split against his teeth, a bead of blood running down his chin.

"Oh?" I said softly. "Is that how it works now?"

He said nothing.

"I give you an order," I screamed at his pathetic face before dashing him another slap.
"You refuse."

Another, meant to hurt even more than the last, followed.

"Then you hide behind Lysander's." The name tasted foul even as I said it.

I caught him by the front of his uniform and hauled him upright just enough to drive my fist into his ribs.

Air rushed from his lungs in a broken gasp as he folded over instinctively.

"My regent," I mocked quietly. "My commanding officer."

I drove my boot into his side.

He crumpled, one arm wrapping around his ribs, the other still planted on the floor as though some stubborn part of him refused to collapse completely.

I looked to the second sentinel. For a moment, I thought he might intervene.

Instead, he stood frozen, his hands twitched once at his sides before falling still again.

He wasn't choosing loyalty exactly. It was more like he was choosing to save his own skin.

He knew exactly what would happen if he stepped between us, which was good for me.

At least, some monkey here still understood where fear belonged.

I looked back at the man on the floor.

Blood dripped steadily from his mouth onto the stone.

He made no attempt to fight me. No attempt to defend himself. He simply endured.

And somehow... Somehow that obedience only deepened the humiliation burning beneath my skin.

I drew my fist back once more.

A hand closed around my wrist before I could throw the next punch.

The grip didn't budge.

"It's becoming rather unbecoming to behave this way, Prince Johann," a deep voice said behind me. "You are royalty. Conduct yourself accordingly."

I turned.

Beta Bradley stood behind me, his face unreadable, his broad frame blocking the corridor. There was no anger in his expression, only a weary sort of disappointment that somehow irritated me more.

"Oh," I said. "You're back."

"Just in time," he replied, "to stop my Alpha's son from disgracing his father's memory before the entire estate."

His gaze drifted past me to the sentinel on the floor, then to the second guard, who remained frozen where he stood.

"You are beating sentinels for obeying the chain of command."

"They were insolent."

"They were obedient."

"They denied me fucking entry."

"They obeyed the regent."

I laughed once.

"So that's what we're calling it now? Obedience?"

"That is precisely what we are calling it because that is what it is."

I pulled against his grip. He didn't move.

"In that case, I was clearly just disciplining them."

"No," Bradley said quietly. "You were punishing them because someone else's authority prevailed over yours."

The words landed like a slap.

"I arrived before you struck the first blow. I heard every word that was exchanged. I saw too." His eyes settled on mine. "They addressed you with respect. They acknowledged your title. They knelt before you. Then they fulfilled the duty they swore to uphold."

He released a slow breath.

"If Lysander has ordered that the rogue remains untouched until he questions him himself, then that order carries the force of law. For the moment, he is regent. As Beta, I am bound to uphold his authority just as these men are. Would you have struck me too?"

"Oh, Fuck you!"

His grip tightened just enough to remind me I needed to watch my fucking tone. It was like he still saw me as the child he trained for battle.

After some seconds of terse silence, he spoke again.

"So tell me, my Prince," he said. "Shall we leave with what remains of your dignity, or shall you continue proving to every witness that you mistake wounded pride for leadership? Especially given the polarizing things people have been saying about your cousin."

I scoffed again and yanked my wrist free, shoving past him hard enough that my shoulder caught his on the way out, and I didn't look back to see how he took it.

His presence, his calm, that measured little speech about propriety and law, only made the fury in my chest burn hotter.

Chapter 53: No safe space

LYSANDER

I carried her into my mother's room and laid her carefully on the bed, the blue light from her hands had long since faded, and her chest was rising and falling in the shallow rhythm of complete exhaustion.

I stood over her for a long moment, studying her face, and the worry that had been sitting in my chest since the moment that light exploded across the great hall settled deeper still.

I had condemned her to the title of breeder in front of half the visiting court not even one hour ago. Now she was something else entirely in their eyes. A healer. A relic of an age most of them had only heard about in bedtime stories meant to frighten pups into behaving. That kind of exposure invited exactly the sort of attention that had wiped her entire kind out of existence the first time around. Power hunger. That was the reason healers had gone extinct, if the old accounts were to be believed. Men who wanted what she could do for themselves and refused to accept no for an answer.

I had no idea yet how to protect her from what was coming. Bad actors. Rogue factions who'd want her gift for their own cause. Elders who'd already started murmuring about divine blessings and what that meant for my claim to a throne I still wasn't sure I wanted.

A knock sounded at the door.

"Who is that?" I said, my voice rough with everything the night had already put me through.

"It's me," Sofiane's voice came back, muffled through the wood.

I crossed the room and opened it, and for a moment neither of us said anything, just stood there taking each other in. Then he crossed the threshold and pulled me into a hug hard enough to knock the breath partway out of me.

"For a second there," he said against my shoulder, "I genuinely thought you were done for."

"You still remember the pin code to this room?" I said, pulling back to look at him.

He stared at me like I'd grown a second head. "That is what you're worried about right now? Genuinely?"

Behind him, Delta stepped into view, and I blinked in surprise at finding her there at all.

"She wanted to come," Sofiane said, catching where my eyes had landed. "Something about swearing her loyalty to you specifically. Said if you were no longer going to be Alpha of our own pack, she'd rather serve the royal house instead of staying behind."

"I don't think that was necessary," I said.

"It was, Your Majesty," Delta said, bowing slightly.

"I'm not King yet," I said. "Please don't call me that."

Sofiane wandered further into the room, glancing around at the walls, the furniture, all of it untouched since the last time either of us had stood here as boys.

"Hasn't changed one bit," he said.

"Uncle clearly didn't want her memory to fade," I said, and then my eyes drifted to the bed, to Bonnie's still form resting against my mother's old pillows.

"A healer from the age of legend. Sleeping in my mother's bed." Sofiane let out something close to a laugh. "If father were here, he would have revolted at the very idea."

"Well," I said. "He's not here."

"I suppose not."

"Why did uncle do it?" Sofiane continued, dropping into a chair near the window. "Make you King, I mean. There's already talk brewing about who takes over Lily of the Valley now that you're vacating the seat. Sounds like it's going to fall to me."

"That's not so bad," I said. "I know you can do it."

"You put too much faith in me," he said. "Father certainly never did."

"Our father was insane," I said. "I don't think he's an authority on anything worth listening to. He mostly despised you because you had the spine to push back against every rule he tried to shove down our throats."

"I don't want any of this either," I added, quieter now. "If I'm being honest. But something is clearly happening here, and I intend to find out what."

"Cousin is shady," Sofiane said, leaning forward, elbows on his knees. "You should have seen his face when that rogue's bullet hit you. Pure bliss, Lysander. I mean it."

"I'm not surprised."

"There have been rumors," he said. "About how cold he was the moment his father— I mean, uncle— died. How fast he was to point fingers at that girl before anyone had even properly examined the scene. Could it be that—"

"You should know better than to believe unsightly rumors," I said like I was any better. "Time will reveal everything eventually."

"You can say that all you want," Sofiane said, "but you should know there are also going to be rumors about you too."

I felt his eyes drift toward the bed again, toward Bonnie.

"Why would there be rumors about me?"

"I don't know if you remember," he said, "but that bullet was meant for her. Not you. And you put yourself directly between it and her anyway."

"I was protecting her from harm."

"At risk to yourself," Sofiane said. "The brother I know isn't that selfless. Not normally. The second it happened, I knew exactly what was going on."

I clenched my jaw, trying and failing to hide the heat rising up my neck, and Sofiane didn't let it go for a single second.

"Was it that obvious?" I said finally.

"Not to everyone," he said. "But to me, it was clear as day."

He tapped my arm lightly. "I'm glad this one's a real girl, at least. Not a ghost like the last one."

"The last one wasn't a ghost."

"Right... Right," he said, standing. "Anyway. I'll leave Delta with you. I need to head back to Lily of the Valley. Stay safe, brother. Two assassination attempts in as many days is genuinely insane."

"I will."

He left, and it was just Delta, me, and Bonnie's unconscious form remaining in the room.

"You didn't have to come," I said.

"In new spaces," Delta said, "you will always need an ally. I imagine it will be difficult for you to trust most people here, especially with her by your side. And after what happened in that hall tonight, it will only get worse."

I hated that she was right.

"Given that look," she said, "I assume I can stay."

"To be frank," I said, "having an Omega around changes very little about the threats she's facing."

"I can fight," Delta said.

"A gun is a gun at the end of the day," I said, and sighed, looking back toward Bonnie. "You will hardly survive a decent attempt. But having someone like you nearby will still be good. She'll have someone. A friend. Can you offer that?"

Delta bowed. "Of course, Alpha Lysander."

I was glad she dropped the royal honorifics.

A knock sounded again, and I nearly cursed under my breath before I heard the voice through the wood.

"Who is it?"

"This is Alpha Bradley."

Chapter 54: The King in the glass

LYSANDER

I crossed to the door and unlocked it immediately.

Bradley stood in the corridor, taller than me by a fair margin, older too as his face carried the kind of authority that came from decades spent surviving in rooms far more dangerous than this one.

He bowed as soon as the door fully opened.

"It's unsafe for you to be without a retainer and a fleet of sentinels, Your Majesty," he said.

He snapped his fingers, and six sentinels filed out of the corridor behind him with practiced precision. Leading them was a weathered wolf whose neck bore a lattice of pale, aged scars. At his side stood a retainer in immaculate uniform, a long scar slashing diagonally across his cheek, lending his otherwise impassive face a permanent air of menace.

"I'm only regent for now," I said. "I do not believe I need all of this. ."

"Well... you do and in a few more days, you will get the crown. So best get used to it, Your Majesty."

I was going to say something about that. But he looked like he wanted to say more so I just kept quiet.

"This isn't the proper room for you either, if I may say so," Bradley added, glancing past me at the space.

"My uncle is still freshly in the morgue," I said. "I don't feel comfortable desecrating his memory in his own chambers yet. I happen to feel more comfortable here." I studied him a moment. "Is there a reason you're here, High Beta?"

Bradley smiled faintly. "I did intend to come regardless. But the main reason is the elders said you wouldn't listen to reason, given the state you were in tonight. I was fairly certain I could make you see it. Reason."

"About the girl?"

"Absolutely not," he said. "The healer is no concern of mine. Interesting, certainly, but she's a breeder now, and yours to do with as you wish. The matter I'm here for is far more pressing."

I remembered the meeting the elders had mentioned earlier that day, the one they'd said I'd learn about in due time.

"Is it about the meeting?" I demanded.

"Oh... they did mention that they already brought it up with you," Bradley said, something approving crossing his face. "I'm glad you remember."

"Can it not wait until tomorrow?"

"I believe tonight is the best time, actually."

"Will you stay here, then," I said, "if I leave? Her protection is paramount right now. I'm sure you understand what exposure like this could invite."

"This space is the safest in the world," Bradley said.

"There have been two attacks in two days. I do not know about that."

"Because we have traitors," Bradley said, matter of fact. "Obviously."

"Do you know who those traitors are?"

"We have a living, breathing rogue currently in custody who was directly involved," he said. "I'm certain some torture would loosen his tongue eventually. If that fails, a delicate or a talented witch would manage it easily enough. The witch option does appetize me."

"I would leave more easily," I said, "if I were certain she'd be protected while I'm gone."

Bradley cleared his throat and turned slightly, and the High Gamma stepped into view from the corridor behind him.

"Will this suffice, Your Majesty," Bradley said, "along with the royal retainer and the sentinels already assigned?"

My eyes settled on the High Gamma. Then they drifted to the scarred retainer, the six sentinels standing in disciplined silence behind him. I measured each of them in turn, searching for hesitation, weakness, anything that suggested they would fail if another attack came.

The High Gamma met my gaze without flinching.

I let the silence stretch another moment before finally nodding.

"Yeah," I said. "Yeah, it will."

"In that case, come with me, Your Majesty."

We left the room, moving through the main estate toward my uncle's old study, where several of the High Elders were already gathered, waiting.

"What are we doing here?" I asked.

"A significant part of ruling all of werewolf society," Bradley said, "is maintaining the status quo. Obeying the will of the goddess." He studied me carefully. "You must know the rhyme."

"The children's rhyme?" There was confusion on my face even as I posed the question as my mind snapped immediately back to what Bonnie had told me my uncle whispered before he died.

"You think quickly," Bradley said, something like approval in his voice. "No wonder the late King cherished you so much." He nodded once. "Yes. The children's rhyme. Do you happen to know what it's actually about?"

I thought of the conversation with Freya, the messages still sitting unread on my phone.

"Lycans," I said.

My mind started to spiral before he'd even confirmed it, questions stacking faster than I could organize them.

"That is correct," Bradley agreed.

"So they exist?" I quizzed, sharing a brief, disbelieving look with the elders standing nearby. None of them looked amused. All of them looked entirely serious.

I was playing my own game with them of course. I knew bits and pieces but it was clear they could know something more.

Bradley stepped closer to me. "Just one."

What did that mean?

"Your hand," he said.

"For what?"

"I need to cut you," he said. "And draw blood."

"And that would be for—"

"The protective spell is hardlocked," Bradley said. "Only royal blood can shatter it, temporarily."

"Please speak plainly," I said. "I don't like being kept in the dark."

"Then offer me your hand, Your Majesty."

I gave it to him, begrudgingly, and he led me to a bare stretch of wall near the far side of the study before drawing a small blade from somewhere inside his coat. Before I could even flinch properly, he cut into my palm and pressed the wound flat against the wallpaper.

The wall drank it greedily.

Crimson veins spread beneath the paper in impossibly precise lines, branching outward until they formed a sprawling rune that pulsed with a dull, living glow. The study fell deathly silent. Every elder watched without speaking.

Then the wallpaper dissolved.

It did not peel away or tear. It simply ceased to exist, revealing a steel door hidden behind it.

Calling it a door felt inadequate.

It was a vault.

Thick slabs of reinforced metal disappeared into the surrounding stone. Interlocking bolts protruded from every edge. The wheel fixed to its center was nearly as tall as Bradley's chest.

"What the fuck," I breathed.

Bradley grasped the wheel.

It took both hands.

Metal groaned against metal as unseen mechanisms shifted somewhere inside the walls. The sound echoed through the study like something ancient stirring in its sleep.

Then...

The vault opened.

Cold air rolled over us.

It carried the sterile bite of chemicals beneath something older, something organic that I couldn't quite place.

"Come with us, Your Majesty," Bradley said, and I followed.

Inside, machinery lined the walls, humming faintly, wires running along the floor toward something at the center of the room that immediately drew every bit of my attention.

A massive tube, tall enough to reach from floor to ceiling, filled with liquid the color of dying moss.

Floating inside it, suspended and hairless, wires threading into his skin from every visible angle, was a butt naked man.

I stopped walking.

"What the fuck," I said again, my voice barely above a whisper. "Who is that?"

Every elder in the room turned toward me in unison, their voices overlapping into a single flat statement that landed in my chest like a stone dropped into still water.

"The Lycan King," they said. "The only surviving member of the Lycan race."

To heal a Rogue

BONNIE

I woke up in a bed that wasn't the one I remembered falling asleep in.

The space looked small and cozy. The bed was much harder on my back than I was used to.

"Lysander?" I called as I sat up, my voice carrying small in a room that felt too bright and too soft to belong to anywhere I'd actually been.

No answer came.

I looked around, and nothing about the space matched my memory of his mother's chambers. The walls were pale, washed in warm morning light, and a window stood open to a meadow rolling out toward some horizon that felt too perfect to be real.

I could see wildflowers from where I sat as a breeze that smelled like nothing I could name brushed over me.

"Where am I?" I muttered.

The second those words left my mouth, the door behind me opened.

A woman stood there, and something in my chest lurched before my mind even caught up to why.

"Honey," she said. "You're awake."

Her voice hit something deep and old in me, and for one suspended second I let myself believe it. Then I actually looked at her face.

It wasn't complete. If I focused too long, her nose simply wasn't there anymore, and there would be a smooth stretch of skin where it should have sat. When I tilted my head, one of her eyes vanished entirely, swallowed into blankness before reappearing a moment later as nothing had happened.

I knew what this was.

I didn't remember what my mother's face actually looked like anymore. Not the real shape of it, not after all these years. My mind had built something close enough to fool me for half a second, and it simply couldn't hold the details steady.

"This isn't real," I said as I realized what the heck was going on. "This is a dream."

She crossed the room and pinched my arm, sharp and sudden, and I winced as a small red mark bloomed against my skin.

"Maybe it's real," she said. "Maybe it isn't. Do you care?"

"I watched you bleed out," I said. "I watched your throat open."

"And where's the body?"

"I don't know what happened to you." My voice cracked. "I raised my hand, and that thing... that sickly light took you away. Along with them. Sometimes I wonder if your body is rotting somewhere out there and if those monsters I sent along are with you too. Desecrating you."

She pulled me into a hug, warm and soft, exactly the way I remembered hugs feeling as a child, and something in me wanted so badly to just stay there.

"Let's wash the blood off your hands," she said.

That confused me.

"What blood?"

She pointed and that pushed me to look down.

When I did, it was right there. Dark and wet, coating my fingers, my palms, with streaks of it running up my forearms.

"Oh," I swallowed in shock. "That wasn't there before."

She took my hand and led me toward a bathroom I hadn't noticed a moment ago, helping me strip out of clothes that hadn't been on me the second before either.

I still remembered what I was wearing before my entire world went dark. Red thin linen to shame me and, of course, shackles.

I argued weakly that I could just wash my hands in the sink, but she shook her head.

"Your whole body is covered in it," she said.

I looked down again, and she was right. It had spread everywhere now, soaked into skin that had been clean a breath ago.

"It's not mine," I said.

"Let's just get you clean," she said, and I let her guide me into the tub, some part of me fully aware this wasn't real and choosing to enjoy the fantasy anyway. I sank into the warm water and let her start on my hair, her fingers working shampoo through it with the exact same rhythm I remembered from childhood.

"I miss this so much," I said.

"I know."

I looked up at her, and her face did the trick again, her features sliding, vanishing and reforming. It only made me look away fast, as hot tears started building behind my eyes.

"I'm all grown now," I said. "I shouldn't be this sentimental."

"You'll always be my baby."

I buried my face against my knees. "I know."

"I pretended to be a male retainer," I said, my voice muffled. I did not even know why I was doing it. I knew deep down this shit wasn't real. But it was nice. The fantasy. It was something I would have told her if she were still alive. "...Just to earn money. It didn't last long. I got discovered." I let out a shaky breath. "I'm even mated to a Lily of the Valley Alpha now, can you believe that? Coupled with that, everyone now knows what I am. What I can do? I'm so scared, Mom."

"It's alright, baby," she said. "Lean your head back a little."

I did, and water ran over my scalp, warm at first, gentle too. It was like standing under rain.

Then her voice changed.

"You could have let the bastard rot, though," she said. "Given what his family did to us. But your whore self saved him anyway."

I froze, certain I'd misheard.

"W...hat did you just say?" I nearly stammered as I lifted my head.

The face in front of me wasn't hers anymore. But before I could make out who I was now looking at. A man's hands closed around my skull instead, rough and enormous, and he shoved my head down into the water before I could scream.

I fought. My arms flailed, my legs kicked against the porcelain, while water rushed into my nose and mouth in violent gulps.

I willed myself to wake up with everything I had left.

It didn't work.

My lungs filled instead, burning, my eyes stinging worse than anything I'd felt in real life, and the world started going soft and grey at the edges as I slipped further under.

Then I was jerked upward, hard, water streaming off my face, and through the haze of choking and blurred vision, I heard a voice, low and certain, right against my ear.

"The royals are your enemies," it said. "Remember that."

I woke up coughing.

Water poured out of my mouth in violent, wracking spasms, my whole body seizing with the force of it, and a girl near the bed rushed toward me, alarm written across her face.

"What's wrong?" she said, reaching for me.

I kicked her.

Hard and straight into her stomach as my body reacted before my mind had caught up to where I actually was.

There was no mercy behind the attack. She flew backward with a cry of pain, crashing into something near the wall.

I kept coughing, my whole chest heaving, my eyes streaming, and I looked around wildly, taking in the room properly for the first time.

This was... Lysander's mother's chambers. The lilac curtains. The covered photo frame on the wall.

I touched the bed and thought I could not be entirely sure. It felt and looked real.

The door burst open fully right then, and several sentinels flooded in alongside a man in royal retainer uniform, all of them alert and tense, with weapons half raised before they registered what they were looking at or up against.

A man I recognized as the High Gamma stepped forward through them.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

I looked down at my hand.

There, faint but unmistakable, sat a small red mark. A pinch. Exactly where she'd pinched me in the dream.

I coughed again, and more water came up, thin and real and undeniable against my palm.

Had I actually been dreaming?

Chapter 56: The tale of Lycaon

LYSANDER

I searched every face in the room, waiting for the smirk, the crack in someone's expression, anything that would tell me this was an elaborate joke that had gone far enough.

No one smiled. No one even looked uncertain.

"The Lycan King," I said slowly. "Why is he inside a glass tube, and..."

The words caught in my throat.

The figure drifted almost weightlessly in the green-lit liquid, pale skin crossed by veins that seemed to pulse with an eerie silver glow beneath the surface. Tubes disappeared into his back, his arms, his neck. His eyes remained closed.

Something about him felt wrong. He did not look dead. Though I could be wrong. He did not look alive either.

Whatever he was, it was something suspended between the two.

"...is he alive?"

"Yes," Beta Bradley answered.

The single word echoed through the chamber.

I barked out a laugh before I could stop myself. "No."

I half expected them to do the same. But all I got back really was silence.

I looked from Bradley to the elders and realized they were being serious about this.

"No, absolutely not. Someone needs to explain why any of this matters, because I feel like I've walked into the middle of a very expensive hallucination."

One of the elders stepped forward with measured, reverent steps. His hands folded before him as though he were approaching an altar rather than a prison.

"You know the old rhyme," he said quietly. "'The goddess blessed some and cursed some. Selene blessed us with her light and cursed them with the dark.'"

I folded my arms. "Of course, I know the nursery rhyme. Everyone does."

"It is no nursery rhyme."

His eyes never left mine.

"One of those she cursed was her own son. A child born of the moon goddess herself, who believed his judgment greater than hers."

Something cold settled in my stomach.

"...Selene had a son?... Like she birthed one?"

The elder inclined his head like he found my thought process ridiculous and I would give it to him. It probably was. But what was I to do?

Bradley continued. "Our goddess walked this world when the earth was still young. She loved a mortal man and remained among humanity for a time, teaching them how to survive, to build, to flourish."

His voice seemed swallowed by the chamber itself.

"But humanity was not alone."

Images I'd seen in old paintings my father loved and the stories as well flashed through my mind.

Dragons.

"The Drakori," Bradley said. "The ancestors of what people now call the elusive dragonkin. They served another deity, Aureon, the Sun God. They refused Selene's guidance because they believed she was beneath their own god, a younger celestial who had abandoned the heavens to concern herself with mortal lives."

The elder's expression hardened.

"That insult did not anger Selene. It angered her son."

Bradley nodded once.

"Lycaon."

Even the name seemed to linger in the air.

"He believed himself protector of his mother's honor. Without her blessing, he gathered those loyal to him and declared war upon the Drakori. Entire cities burned. Blood stained lands that had never known violence. He believed every life he took glorified his mother."

My mouth had gone dry.

"And Selene?"

"She was horrified."

The answer came instantly.

"When the war finally ended," Bradley said, "she did what no god had ever done." His gaze shifted toward the tube. "She judged her own child."

The room felt smaller.

The green glow from the cylinder painted everyone's faces with sickly light.

"She stripped him of the blessings she had given him by twisting his immortal body into something neither divine nor mortal. She cursed every warrior who had followed him, every soul who willingly took part in his crusade."

The elder lowered his head.

"And thus the first Lycans were born."

The words settled over the chamber like falling ash.

"Their greatest punishment," another elder murmured, "was not the curse itself."

Bradley looked back at me.

"It was that Selene turned her face from them forever."

He lifted one hand toward the towering cylinder.

"That..."

His voice became almost reverent.

"...is Lycaon."

I stared at the figure.

The shape inside the glass had not moved.

Yet every instinct I possessed screamed that something beyond human understanding rested only a few feet away.

"This..." My voice came out hoarse. "You're telling me the founder of the Lycan race..."

I couldn't finish the sentence.

My heartbeat thundered in my ears.

It was ridiculous.

Impossible.

My mind clawed desperately for another explanation.

A clone... Some elaborate genetic experiment... Anything but this.

"You cannot seriously expect me to believe that's a demigod."

No one answered.

That silence frightened me far more than any argument could have.

I took an involuntary step closer to the cylinder.

The liquid rippled.

Just once. It was tiny and barely noticeable.

Yet every hair on my arms stood upright.

"How long..." I swallowed hard, unable to tear my eyes away from the thing suspended inside the glass.

"...how long has he been here?"

"Surprisingly, not long at all," Bradley said. "Two decades ago, he attempted to reclaim influence over the throne, perhaps to further shame his own mother in front of the world she'd left him to answer for. Lucky for us, we had capable witches and soldiers willing to lay down their lives to stop him. Many did."

"Then why in the goddess's name are we keeping him as some kind of trophy," I said.
"Why not simply kill him?"

"Because he is part god," Bradley said. "We would very much like him dead. We do not have that choice." He gestured toward the tube. "He is currently suspended in a potent mixture of liquid silver and the purest wolfsbane nectar known to exist. He is drowned in it constantly, electrocuted at intervals to keep his heart from strengthening past a controlled threshold, and held beneath a rune crafted by fifteen powerful witch bloodlines working in tandem to keep him unconscious and immobile." His jaw tightened. "And still, he remains a risk to us."

"We brought you here, Alpha Lysander," he continued, "to explain the foundation of your rule. Protecting this kingdom means, in part, ensuring the creature in that tube remains exactly where he is. Forever, if we are fortunate." He gestured toward the space before the tank. "This is where you will make your secret oath. An oath nobody but the people in this room can know. Before the High Elders, before your predecessors, and before the goddess herself."

"How can any of us be certain this is what the goddess actually wants?" I said.

"One thing about the goddess," Bradley said, something almost dry in his tone. "If she hates something, you will know it plainly enough. She does not hide her displeasure."

I looked back at the floating, hairless figure in the tube, at the wires and the sickly green water and the stillness of a body that had apparently once burned the sky.

I needed to get this over with quickly.

"I don't have a problem with it," I said. "What oath do I need to take?"

The elders began speaking the words to me, slow and deliberate, and I repeated each line back with my eyes fixed on the tube in front of me.

"I, Lysander Asker, swear before the goddess Selene and the High Elder Circle to guard the seal that binds Lycaon, son of the moon, enemy of the sun. I swear to protect this kingdom from the darkness he represents, to uphold the laws set forth to contain what remains of his curse, and to never, by word or deed, allow his release. This I swear on my blood, my crown, and my line."

When I finished, every elder in that room bowed low before me, their heads dipping in near perfect unison, the ceremony complete.

I glanced back toward the tube one final time.

For a single, impossible second, the man's eyes looked like they were open, fixed directly on me through the murky green liquid, pale and unblinking and entirely too aware for a creature supposedly kept unconscious by fifteen bloodlines of witch magic.

I blinked and turned back to it.

His eyes were closed again, exactly as they had been the entire time, still and lifeless behind the glass.

Had I imagined that?

To heal a Rogue

BONNIE

The High Gamma looked at me at first and after taking in the state that I was in, he turned to the girl I'd kicked and said, "Is that water?"

There was something sharp settling into his expression as he continued. "The only reason I can tolerate you being in this room, despite lacking the training our born and bred Omegas in this house receive, is because Alpha Lysander seemed comfortable with your presence here." His eyes narrowed. "Are you trying to drown the girl and put the rest of us in trouble?"

"Of course not," the girl said quickly. "She woke up disoriented. Coughing out water."

"Yeah, that makes sense. People just cough water." He then turned back to him, putting his hand in his gun already like he was ready to take someone out. "You, did she do something to you?"

I forced myself upright, the last of the cough finally settling in my chest. "She didn't do anything to me."

I looked at her properly, guilt already crawling up my spine. "I'm sorry. For kicking you."

She waved it off, though I noticed the careful way she held her stomach as she did it. My mind snagged, briefly, on the strangeness of the whole room. A High Gamma and a fleet of sentinels, all of them looking genuinely concerned for me instead of hungry to end me like it has been since the accusations started flying. That gnawing feeling settled deeper the longer I sat with it.

They'd seen it. The blue light. The stitching of Lysander's ruined throat with nothing but my will and my hands. A healer had walked among them tonight, and apparently that changed the temperature of an entire room.

I looked around the room again. But Lysander was nowhere to be found and that bothered me in degrees I could not begin to explain.

"Where's Lysander?" I asked.

"He's in an important meeting," the Gamma said.

My eyes drifted past him toward the door, where I could see the shapes of several sentinels posted just outside, alongside the retainer already stationed inside. It made me feel like a jewel under guard rather than a person who could simply exist in a room. I

didn't like it. My heart started beating faster, and before I could stop myself, my voice came out soft, almost pleading.

"Can he come here? I want him here."

"That won't be possible right now," the Gamma said. "Once he's finished, I'm certain he'll come to you. For now, if you need anything, you may ask any of us."

The girl I'd kicked smiled gently. "My name is Delta by the way. I am an Omega under Alpha Lysander back in Lily of the Valley. He's put me in charge of your care. So you don't need to worry."

Why was everyone telling me that? I was losing my mind.

She even reached out to touch my arm, meaning to comfort me, and I pulled back before her fingers landed.

"I'm fine now," I said. "I just want to clean up."

That was when I noticed the chains were gone from my throat and wrists. I hadn't even registered it until that moment, but they were no longer on me. I was however still wearing the sheer red dress from earlier, and I crossed an arm over my chest instinctively, covering what the fabric didn't.

"Can I have some privacy?"

"Of course," the Gamma assured. "We'll be right outside. The moment you feel unsafe, let us know."

I nodded, and they filed out, leaving Delta and me alone in the room. I was glad even the retainer took the hint and left. Usually, in our line of work, we were deemed invisible.

I studied the Omega the second the door shut.

My instincts kicked in fast, sharp and practical the way they'd always been. Things had gone completely sideways tonight. Lysander might be decent, in whatever limited way an Alpha could be decent... well... that ranking system had to be damned considering he has taken a bullet for me not too long ago and without knowing he would survive it. But... but the truth remained that I hadn't been thinking clearly when I saved him. I understood that now, with a clarity that felt almost embarrassing. It had to be the stupid mate bond. Yes, that was it. The fucked up instinct that was outside my own control, driving me to do something I'd sworn to myself I'd never do again.

I glanced toward the windows which sadly happened to be barred, unlike the guest room I'd been in earlier. This felt like a prison dressed up in lilac and soft furniture now.

But if I could get past the Omega, maybe I could figure something out. I had training. I was good at this.

What was some Omega that I couldn't take out?

"Are you thinking of attacking me?"

The question caught me completely off guard.

"What?" I said, like she had not clocked my ass.

"It's in your eyes," The girl who I remembered said her name was Delta said. "I can tell." She studied me a moment longer. "I do hope you won't, though."

"Why not?" I swallowed. "You don't understand what's happening here."

"I have a pretty good idea," She said in a tone that was probably sharper than she meant to. "I was there when you healed him. I saw the whole spectacle and I know it must be terrifying," she continued. "But Alpha Lysander will protect you. He's your mate after all, isn't he?"

Something cold went through me. "He told you that?"

"It was fairly obvious," she said. "I know him a little. But he confirmed it himself, actually, while talking to his brother earlier."

"I know it's frightening," she continued, softer now. "But Alpha Lysander will look after you."

I scoffed. "You're brainwashed if you think high rankers give a damn about most people other than themselves. I will admit. Lysander is probably the best of the lot. But an Alpha is still an Alpha."

Delta sat down slowly on the edge of the bed. "You don't sound like you actually believe that."

Fuck, she was really good at reading people. I was trying to convince myself and her that was the case. It needed to be.

Chapter 58: Even if your heart was stone

BONNIE

So all that remained was to double down.

"I do," I said. "He's selfish. You know... I begged him to reject me. Maybe if he had, none of this would have happened. Maybe I wouldn't have needed to save him at all."

I laughed at myself then, short and bitter. My double down was a massive flop. I couldn't do a fairly decent job of convincing myself.

"I sound ridiculous. This whole mess started the moment fate decided to string us together, and after that, I walked into that library by choice. I'm probably going to be trapped here like some bird in a cage until I die and that is because I do not know when to..."

I couldn't even finish that sentence. It was hard to admit that dominoes this bad could be started with so simple choices. If I had let that Omega suffer from his burns then. I would have lived a fairly normal life. It was the same thing now too. Nothing had changed about me.

"I believe you're going to be queen," Delta said.

"I don't want to be queen," I said. "And if you'd actually been in that hall tonight, you'd know I was just made a breeder in front of all the visiting court."

"You're very pessimistic," Delta said, tilting her head slightly. "Without a lot of the other negative traits attached to that sort of world view. It reminds me of my former mistress."

My eyes drifted to the covered photo frame across the room. "Lysander's mother?"

"No," Delta said. "I wasn't Lily of the Valley originally. I was Silvercreek."

That caught my attention properly. "Oh. You defected?"

"Something like that." She folded her hands in her lap. "I was personal Omega to a Luna. Well, an eventual Omega when she was demoted. Hazel Hughes."

"Oh," I said. "His dead chosen mate?"

It was hot piping tea when it had happened. There was so much drama with Silvercreek, Skollrend and Lily of the Valley. While I did not engage much with those, I knew a few things.

"Yes." Delta nodded.

"This might sound insane to admit," Delta went on, "but when she died, if I'd been sent back to Silvercreek, my life would have been taken along with hers. Alpha Lysander decided to make me Lily of the Valley instead."

"Why would you make that choice?" I said. "That sounds like jumping from a frying pan into a fire."

"Hazel tried to have her way with Lysander's father," Delta said, "because she knew Lysander didn't love her. The match has the time was made to protect her from the punishment of behaving for all her crimes. Alpha Wenzel, Lysander's father was a man of rules. She calculated that if she could get him to take her during heat season, when she was most fertile, whatever crimes she'd committed would be forgiven the moment she got pregnant with his child." She sighed. "It was a mess. It led to Alpha Wenzel's death. She was taken out in response by Alpha Lysander himself. There was no world where I would have survived what came after that. You could say he saved me."

"But she didn't kill Alpha Wenzel, did she," I said. "I know it was Lysander."

Delta's composure slipped for half a second before she caught it. "What... Where did you hear that?"

And that confirmed to me that she was in some way full of bullshit. Except she didn't know. So why then was she so sure he was such a saint and white knight?

I scoffed. "Keep your secrets." Then I added, "It doesn't change the fact that Lily of the Valley is no better than anywhere else. Little secret of my own. I'm a rogue who used to be an Omega there. It was hell."

Delta let out a small laugh. "Perhaps under his father, yes. With him gone, Alpha Lysander is actually a fair Alpha. Lily of the Valley has changed for the better."

"I also know how good their brainwashing can be," I said.

"I'm not easily gotten like that," Delta said. "Alpha Lysander will need to travel back to Lily of the Valley soon, to formally give up his seat as head of the pack before he is formally crowned as King of the werewolves. You could come with us. See for yourself."

I could tell she genuinely meant it. I opened my mouth to answer, some sharp retort already forming, when the door opened and his scent hit me first, warm and rich and instantly familiar, the bond between us pulsing sudden and alive.

I turned, and there he was.

The relief written across his face at finding me safe was so plain, so entirely unguarded, that the bond carried the shape of it straight into my chest before he'd even said a word. He crossed the room fast and pulled me into his arms, holding tight, and I stood there stiff for half a second before something in me simply gave in and let him.

In that moment, I could only wonder, with something close to dread, why my heart had chosen exactly that instant to skip a beat.

My body betrayed me before my mind could catch up. I hated that. Hated the way the knot inside my chest loosened simply because he was here, because he was alive, because his heartbeat was steady against my ear. It felt less like relief and more like surrender, and I had spent too much of my life fighting to surrender to anyone.

I pulled back first. Half because I didn't want him to hear how loud my heart was beating and because the sentinels and the Gamma were now staring at us weird.

"You're crushing me," I muttered, though there wasn't much force behind it.

His hands loosened immediately, his eyes searching my face with an intensity that made it difficult to breathe.

There was no triumph there, no possessiveness, only quiet concern that looked painfully genuine.

"Are you hurt?" he asked softly.

Was he fucking serious? He was the one who was shot in the neck? I was fine.

But the look on his face... He was fucking serious about it. Whatever quirky remark I wanted to throw died then.

I shook my head.

"No..."

Chapter 59: A quiet moment 1

LYSANDER

I glanced back at the tube one final time as we walked away, and told myself I'd simply been seeing things. His eyes had been closed the entire time. They had to have been.

Still, the question that mattered most hadn't been brought up to be answered by any of them.

"What if he gets out?" I asked. "What happens then? Is there a plan for that?"

"I don't believe it will come to that," Bradley replied.

"It's your job to plan for the worst thing that could happen," I said. "Please don't have me believe you're all simply hoping this stays perfectly contained forever."

"We have the magical bloodlines who assist us on call," he said. "We simply have to trust we can subdue him again, should the need ever arise."

"Fine," I said. "I guess that will do. It is clear that we are fucked and just waiting for luck."

We stepped out through the reinforced door, and Bradley shut it firmly behind us. The metal shimmered once and dissolved entirely, the wall reforming itself into ordinary wallpaper as though nothing had ever been hidden there at all.

"Your Majesty, Do ensure you say nothing of this to anyone," Bradley said. "Not even your own blood."

"I'm not exactly the chatty type," I said.

The moment we stepped out of the study, a sentinel came sprinting down the corridor toward us, breathless.

"What is it," Bradley demanded.

"The High Gamma sent me," the man said, catching his breath between words. "The girl. The rogue healer. She's awake."

Everything else went to white noise.

I was moving before I'd finished processing the sentence, cutting straight through the hall toward my mother's old chambers, and every sentinel and retainer I passed cleared a path without needing to be told twice. I probably looked half feral by the time I reached the door, but I found I didn't particularly care how it appeared to anyone watching.

I typed the pin with fingers that weren't quite steady and pushed the door open.

She sat there on the bed, whole and upright, color back in her cheeks, and the relief that swept through me was instant and entirely unguarded. I crossed the room without a second of hesitation and pulled her into my arms.

She went rigid for one brief moment before her body eased into the hold, and something in my chest finally settled, the panic that had been clawing at me since she vanished into that room finally quieting at the simple fact of her being alive and unhurt against me.

"You're crushing me," she muttered against my shoulder.

I released her instantly, my hands falling away, though my eyes stayed fixed on her face, searching every inch of it for anything I might have missed.

The curious glances from the sentinels and the High Gamma lingering near the doorway barely registered. None of that mattered next to the certainty I needed.

"Are you hurt?" I asked, my voice low.

She shook her head. "No." Then, clearing her throat she said, "Just tired."

"Alright," I said, and turned toward the others still crowded near the door. "It's late. The retainer stays by the door out of necessity. My Omega as well." I glanced at Delta. "The rest of you may go."

They bowed and complied without argument. Delta bowed last, saying she'd be right outside if either of us needed anything, and locked the door behind her as she left.

I turned back to Bonnie.

"Why wouldn't you tell me?" I asked.

"I was afraid," she said. "I've kept this buried in me for so long. It's the reason my own mother died in the first place." She wrapped her arms around herself. "I know exactly what power like this does to people. What it turns them into wanting from someone like me."

I reached for her hand. "And yet you saved me, revealing yourself to all of them. Why?"

She looked away, her jaw tightening slightly. "Because I can't stand injustice or a loser dying for me, probably."

"Oh," I said. "I was expecting a rather different answer."

Her eyes snapped back to mine, and she pulled her hand free of my grip. "What a way to cheapen the moment."

"I don't know what you were thinking I'd say," I said. "My mind happens to be quite pure."

"Sure it is," she said, crossing her arms. "What's your move now, exactly, now that I've revealed my hand? I feel like a diamond under armed guard."

"I can save you from the breeder title," I said, "regardless of how the investigation into my uncle's killer progresses from here. Once that stain is gone, I can name you my mate openly. That offers you far more protection than hiding ever will, as well as the trouble with now being revealed as a healer. Many will think twice before offending the whole werewolf world."

"I don't want that," she said.

"Why not?"

"It isn't just about me," she said. "I wanted a simple life. I suppose that's never going to happen now." She scoffed, quiet and bitter. "If only I'd been ordinary."

I took her hand again, gentler this time. "There's nothing wrong with not being ordinary." I paused. "There's something I need to tell you."

"What are you talking about?"

"I know someone like you," I said. "A healer. Just like you."

"What," she said, her brow furrowing.

"Moments ago, actually," I said. "She was with you, while you were unconscious. Her name is Fia." I studied her face carefully. "You might already know of her. The Omega who married into Skollrend."

"Her?" Bonnie said, something shifting behind her eyes.

"Yes," I said. "She has visions, sometimes. Fragments of what's coming." I held her gaze. "One of the reasons I've refused to let you go from the very start is because she told me, long before any of this happened, that I would find you. And I did. Everything she described about you turned out true, down to the smallest detail. That's how I know this isn't simply chance, Bonnie. This is fate."

She said nothing, her expression caught somewhere between disbelief and something softer she clearly hadn't decided whether to trust yet.

"Now... of course," I said, "you don't have to believe any of it. But I need you to give me a real chance."

Chapter 60: A quiet moment 2

BONNIE

His hand stayed around mine, warm and steady, and I found myself staring at where our fingers met instead of looking at him.

Looking at him had become its own problem.

Not because he was incredibly handsome, though that was difficult enough to ignore. It was because my thoughts kept slipping whenever our eyes met. I'd know exactly what I wanted to say, then I'd look at him for a second too long and everything unraveled before I could get the words out.

I hated that.

He'd never tried to hide the bond from me or been ruthless.

Not when I'd insulted him.

Not when I'd begged him to sever whatever thread fate had knotted between us.

And not now.

He stood there talking about visions, fate, and another healer as though none of it required convincing. He wasn't trying to sway me with impossible promises or carefully chosen words. He was only telling me what he believed.

He'd been the same from the beginning.

Open about wanting to protect me.

Open about clearing my name.

Open about standing in front of an entire court and calling me his mate while I still had chains around my wrists.

Nothing about him fit.

Life had taught me what powerful men looked like. They took what they wanted. They called possession affection. If they offered kindness, it came with a debt attached, and you were expected to thank them for giving less cruelty than someone else might have.

Lysander kept asking.

Kept explaining.

Kept waiting for me to decide instead of deciding for me.

It made no sense.

He felt like something that had slipped into the world by accident, stitched into the wrong story.

And somehow my heart had chosen that impossible mistake to fixate on.

"I'll think about it," I said.

The words came out quieter than I'd meant them to.

I eased my hand from his, carefully enough that it didn't feel like rejection, only a reminder that there had to still be space between us.

There had to be.

"I'm just... very tired."

His thumb brushed lightly over mine before he let go.

"I can wait."

The words settled somewhere under my ribs.

There wasn't any frustration in them.

No disappointment.

No hidden demand dressed up as patience.

Just quiet certainty.

I can wait.

I blinked down at my lap.

People didn't wait.

They wanted answers before you'd even found the right questions. They lost patience. They told you your fear was inconvenient. They expected gratitude because they hadn't been quite as cruel as the last person.

Waiting meant believing the answer might change one day.

Waiting meant believing you were worth the time.

I wasn't sure anyone ever had.

Before he could see any of that on my face, I turned toward the bed.

"Are you fine with me sleeping in this bed?" He asked.

"I don't care," I muttered.

The blanket had already been pulled almost to my chin, but I fussed with it anyway, smoothing wrinkles that weren't there because my hands needed something to do.

The mattress dipped.

His scent reached me before his voice.

Like fresh honey and maybe it was his clothes. There was cedar and the scent of clean linen. It was a combination that was simply... him.

I'd started recognizing it without meaning to.

"Are you sure?"

His voice came from just beside my ear.

Heat climbed my neck so quickly it almost hurt.

Goosebumps chased across my arms.

Traitors.

Every last one of them.

"I'll take the chair," I said, throwing the blanket aside before my body embarrassed me any further.

I barely got halfway upright.

His fingers caught my wrist.

Gentle.

Never forcing.

Just enough that my balance disappeared.

A tiny, thoroughly undignified squeak escaped me as I tipped sideways onto the mattress.

He moved with me on instinct, catching himself before any of his weight settled against me.

One hand braced beside my head.

The other landed near my shoulder.

He'd left enough space between us that I could still have rolled away.

Instead, I looked up.

A terrible decision.

His eyes were bright with amusement.

Not mockery.

Something softer.

"You know," he murmured, one corner of his mouth lifting, "I rather like you this way."

"What way?"

"Feisty."

His smile deepened.

"Like a little spitfire."

I rolled my eyes.

"You're doing an awful job of convincing me to like you."

"That wasn't the objective."

"No?"

"No."

He considered me for a moment, thoughtful enough that I almost believed he was about to say something serious.

"That's fortunate."

I frowned.

"Why?"

"Because you're accomplishing the exact opposite."

My stomach lurched.

I ignored it with every ounce of dignity I had left.

"But," he said, and the teasing in his expression eased into something quieter, "I am still a gentleman."

I let out a disbelieving laugh.

"You?"

"Me."

"What sort of gentleman throws a woman back onto a bed?"

"The considerate sort."

"I didn't realize there were different kinds."

"There are."

He looked far too pleased with himself.

"This particular kind refuses to let an exhausted woman spend the night folded into a wooden chair while he stretches out across an entire bed."

"A sensible man would."

"A sensible man," he replied, "would know he's already won this argument."

I lifted a brow.

"You think you're winning?"

"I know I am."

"You are unbelievably arrogant."

"I've heard that."

"I imagine often."

"Usually from people who end up admitting I was right."

I stared at him.

He only looked back, patient as ever, like he had all the time in the world.

The silence stretched between us, and to my horror, I felt the edge of a smile tugging at my mouth.

I smothered it before it could grow.

"I'll take the chair," he decided.

"I never agreed to that." I retorted.

"You don't have to."

"I absolutely do." I maintained.

"I listened to your objections."

"You ignored them."

"I considered them."

"You dismissed them."

"I believe it can be argued that I reached a different conclusion."

I groaned, letting my head fall back onto the pillow.

"You're impossible."

"So I've been told."

Before I could think of another argument, he leaned down.

His lips brushed my forehead.

The kiss barely lasted an instant. Warm enough to leave its trace against my skin, light enough that I almost questioned whether it had happened at all. By the time I looked at him, he'd already drawn back.

That hadn't been fair.

There had been no heat behind it, none of the hunger I'd been bracing myself against ever since the bond revealed itself. No claim. No silent demand that I return the gesture.

It had felt more like someone checking that I was real.

Like a promise whispered without words.

The warmth he'd left behind lingered against my skin, impossibly vivid, and I became acutely aware of the pillow beneath my head, the soft brush of the blanket against my chin, the frantic beat of my own heart echoing in my ears.

Looking at the ceiling suddenly seemed like the safest decision I'd made all day.

For some reason, that made him chuckle.

"Goodnight, Bonnie." His voice came quietly this time.

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

There was too much tangled inside a single word.

Too much I didn't understand well enough to name.

I heard him step away.

The floorboards gave a faint creak beneath his weight.

Another followed. He was headed towards the chair.

A moment later, old wood complained softly as he settled into it.

I turned my head before I could stop myself.

He'd meant it.

There hadn't been some hidden plan to wear me down until I gave in. No expectation that I'd eventually cave because saying no often enough became exhausting.

He'd only wanted me to sleep comfortably.

The realization sat heavily in my chest.

Annoyingly so.

Outside, the palace had fallen quiet.

Moonlight spilled across the floor in pale ribbons, stopping just short of the bed. Somewhere beyond the room, a pair of guards passed through the corridor, their boots dull against stone before the sound faded into the distance.

I pulled the blanket a little higher.

It still held the day's warmth.

Delta's words crept back anyway.

Lily of the Valley has changed.

He's your mate.

Alpha Lysander will protect you.

Then this Fia and her vision.

The future everyone else seemed so certain of.

A throne I had never wanted.

I'd spent so long wishing for ordinary things that I hardly knew what to do with any of this.

A roof that could be mine.

Enough food that I didn't have to wonder where the next meal would come from.

People I loved staying alive long enough for tomorrow to matter.

Those dreams had felt impossible once.

Now kingdoms, prophecies, and fate kept crashing into my life as though my opinion had never been part of the conversation.

I let out a slow breath and turned toward the window.

The moonlight reached the chair where Lysander sat.

His head rested against the back, arms folded loosely across his chest.

He looked asleep.

I sighed.

Even asleep, he looked uncomfortable. His legs were far too long for the chair, one boot braced awkwardly against the floor to keep from sliding.

Served him right.

Idiot.

The thought should have carried more satisfaction than it did.

Instead, I found myself watching the steady rise and fall of his breathing until I caught myself.

I looked away. What the heck!?

"...Goodnight," I whispered into the darkness.

A quiet huff answered me almost immediately. Just the faint sound of a laugh he clearly hadn't managed to hold back.

My eyes narrowed. He'd been awake.

Of course he had.

I tugged the blanket over my nose with an exaggerated scowl, refusing to give him the satisfaction of another response.