

To heal a Rogue

c 61-70

Chapter 61: Wish and wish

JOHANN

I sat with my head in my hands longer than I wanted to admit, running the whole night back through my mind like I could somehow edit it into something cleaner.

Maybe Sterling had been right. Rogues didn't stand for anything larger than their own skins, and I'd bet the entire evening on men who folded the second the plan required an ounce of sacrifice from anyone but me. There wasn't much I could do about it now except sit here and hope the whole mess didn't collapse on my head before morning.

The second phone buzzed against the desk, and I ignored it. It buzzed again a minute later, and I ignored that too. By the third time, I gave in and snatched it up.

"Hello," I said. "What do you want? I happen to be fairly busy right now."

"When do we get the gift of the bite?"

I closed my eyes. "Goddess. You people are insufferable. The day isn't even finished yet."

That set him off.

"We killed for you," he snapped. "We sacrificed one of our own for this cause. If you think for one second you can play us, you've got another thing coming. We'll tell the whole Kingdom exactly what kind of man you are. Don't test us."

Something cold slid down my spine at that.

"Calm down," I said, working to keep my voice level. "You'll get it. You'll get it. I promise."

"We're past mutual understanding and respect now," he said. "Give us the bite by tomorrow, or we start singing like canaries."

The line went dead before I could answer.

I swore under my breath and threw the phone onto the desk, hard enough that it skidded and nearly went off the edge. My hands weren't steady when I picked up the other one and dialed my mother.

She answered on the second ring.

"How did it go," she said. "Was it a success? I have been trying to reach out to Sterling but that bastard wouldn't pick."

"It might have been." I dragged a hand down my face. "Lysander was shot. Should have bled out in front of the entire court. Except that girl turns out to be a healer. A god-damned healer, Mother. What am I even supposed to do with that? His entire rule is going to look blessed now instead of cursed. And it doesn't help that the rogues have started threatening me directly."

Silence stretched long enough that I thought the call had dropped.

"A healer," she said finally. "What girl? What girl are you talking about?"

"The one everyone blamed for father's murder."

More silence. I could practically hear her rearranging everything she thought she knew.

"Don't worry about the rogues," she said. "I'll handle them."

"There's something else too," I said. "The rogue who attacked Lysander tonight. He was arrested. Not killed, like I expected. What if he talks?"

"What the fuck, Johann." Her voice cracked sharp through the phone, sharper than I'd heard from her in years. "That's fucked. I expected better than this from you. You were supposed to think through every way this could go wrong. Why didn't you?"

"Don't put this on me right now," I said, my own voice climbing to match hers. "You kept secrets from me my entire life. So tell me something, Mother. You said it yourself, if I don't take that throne, I die a slow, agonizing death the day I hit a certain age. Do you know when that is?"

She didn't answer.

"Next week," I said. "It's next week, Mother. I'm afraid. Of course I wasn't thinking clearly tonight. Sue me for it."

Something in her seemed to crumble on the other end.

"Baby," she said, quieter now. "I'm sorry. I am so sorry. I'm your mother. I only ever wanted the best for you." A pause followed, and I heard something wet catch in her throat before she pushed past it. "Don't worry about any of it. I'll handle most of this myself. I promise you that."

"But aren't you sick," I said. "Aren't you supposed to be resting, not cleaning up after my mistakes?"

"I've been sick for a long time now, Johann," she said. "I'll be fine."

I didn't believe her. I wasn't sure she believed herself either. But I let the silence hang there anyway, both of us pretending the lie was solid enough to stand on, because neither of us had anything better to offer the other tonight.

BONNIE

"About the night children thing," Lysander said into the dark. "What my uncle told you. I figured it out."

I turned my head toward him. "What is it?"

"It's the one secret I'll have to keep from you," he said. "I'm sorry."

"You could've just kept quiet about it entirely," I said. "Not even mentioned it existed. Then I wouldn't have cared. Now for some reason, it will be on my mind."

"Yikes. Part of why I brought it up was because I didn't want it sitting on your mind," he said.

He then shifted in the chair again, and the old wood groaned under him.

"Is it uncomfortable?" I asked.

"I'm sure it'll do wonders for my spine."

The thought crossed my mind before I could stop it, and I hated that it did, hated it the way you hate a splinter you can feel but can't quite reach.

"You should come back to the bed," I said.

His eyes opened. "Really?"

"As long as you're not weird about it."

He was up and crossing the room before I'd finished the sentence, and I pulled a pillow from behind my head and set it down the middle of the mattress like a wall that actually meant something.

"Do not cross this line," I said.

"I'm not exactly the calmest sleeper," he said, settling in on his side of it.

"I knew you'd make me regret this somehow."

"Okay. Okay. I'm sorry."

He tugged his side of the duvet up, and I turned onto my other side so I wouldn't have to look at him while I tried to fall asleep. I could feel him watching anyway. I didn't need to see it to know.

"It'll be very hard for me to sleep," I said, "if you keep staring at me like I'm prey. Turn the other way."

"Sorry."

I heard the rustle of him shifting, and when I glanced back, barely, but just enough to check, he actually had turned, his back to me now, shoulders rising and falling slow.

Something close to a laugh caught in my throat before I swallowed it down.

I faced forward again, closed my eyes, and waited for sleep to find me, which, given everything the day had thrown at me, felt like asking for entirely too much.

The dark behind my eyes dissolved without warning.

I was standing in a room I didn't recognize, and Lysander was already there, which was the only orientation I needed. Just him, close enough that the warmth of him reached me before he did, his eyes already doing that thing where they saw too much.

He crossed to me and I didn't move back.

His hands found my face the way hands found things they had been reaching for a long time, both palms warm against my jaw, and he looked at me for one long moment before he kissed me. There was nothing tentative in it. His mouth moved against mine like a

decision already made, and I felt myself open to it before I had time to form a position on the matter, my hands finding his chest, the lapels of his jacket, something to grip.

He kissed me until my lips were swollen with it. Until I was making sounds into his mouth that I wouldn't have recognized as myself in daylight.

When he pulled back it was only enough to breathe.

His hands moved to my throat, my collarbone, tracing the line of me with a deliberateness that felt like inventory. Like he was accounting for every inch. I reached for his jacket and he let me push it off his shoulders. His shirt followed and I pressed my palms to his chest and felt the difference again, that specific quality underneath the warmth, the body that had decided to be solid as a courtesy, and it should have been strange and it wasn't.

He walked me back until my knees hit something and then I was down and he was over me, his mouth finding my neck, the spot below my ear, the curve of my shoulder where he had bitten me before. I felt the ghost of that bite move through me all over again and my spine lifted off the mattress.

His hands worked my clothes away without rushing any of it. He kissed each thing he uncovered, my collarbone, my sternum, the soft skin of my ribs. By the time his mouth closed over my breast I was already past managing what sounds I made. He sucked hard and I arched into him, my hand pressing the back of his head, keeping him there, and when he moved to my other breast and his fingers replaced his mouth on the first, the dual sensation scattered every coherent thought I had been attempting.

He looked up at me.

Those impossible green eyes, the gold bleeding in at the edges, fixed on my face.

"More?" he said.

"Yes." There was no hesitation. None.

He moved lower.

He kissed down my stomach and I felt every single one, a slow deliberate trail that built anticipation until I was trembling before he even arrived. When he finally put his mouth on me I stopped trying to be quiet. His tongue worked in strokes that built on each other, finding the precise rhythm my body gave itself away to, and my thighs closed around his head and my hand went to his hair and pressed him down and I heard myself say his name in a register I didn't use in ordinary life.

He took his time. That was what undid me. The patience of it, the complete unhurried focus, like he had nowhere else to be and no interest in being there. I rode his face without shame and the pleasure coiled tighter and tighter until it had nowhere left to go.

I came with my hand pressed over my own mouth, my whole body seized and flooding, and he worked me through every wave of it until I was shaking and oversensitive and pulling at his hair to bring him back up.

He came back up and kissed me. I tasted myself on his tongue and kissed him back harder.

My hand found him between us, hard and wanting, and I wrapped my fingers around him and stroked once and felt his whole body respond, the sharp exhale, his hips pressing forward. I worked him slowly and his mouth found my ear and his breath against it made every hair on my body stand up.

I got my lips to his jaw.

"I need you inside me," I said. "Now."

He took my leg and lifted it over his shoulder in one smooth movement and pressed into me.

The stretch was complete and extraordinary and we both went still for a breath. Before he continued moving. The rhythm he set was not gentle and the headboard registered its objection loudly and continuously and I didn't care. I held onto him and took every stroke and the sounds coming out of me were past managing. His mouth found my throat, my breast, my jaw. His thumb worked my clit in tight circles and I felt myself climbing again, impossibly fast.

When his lips dropped to my throat, that was when I realized this was a dream. I was having a sex dream about Lysander.

The thought however did not stay for long because the second that registered, his fangs broke through.

To heal a Rogue

BONNIE

The euphoria did not last.

"You like being his little whore, don't you."

The voice had been Lysander's a second ago. It wasn't anymore. It dragged itself down into something guttural, something that scraped instead of spoke.

"Little Omega thinks she can be a queen because her hands can spark."

I opened my eyes and there was no green in them anymore, no gold bleeding at the edges. There was nothing at all. A grey, faceless thing pinned me to the mattress, and I screamed loud enough to tear something in my own throat. It did not help much but I continued to scream and shove and claw at whatever passed for its shoulders.

I got a leg free and drove my heel into it, hard, and it staggered enough that I twisted out from under it and slammed my palm into the side of its head. Something in its neck gave with a wet, wrong sound, and its head kept turning past where a head should stop, all the way around, like an owl deciding to look behind itself.

Its spine followed. I watched it happen, watched the whole shape of it fold and stretch, legs lengthening past anything a body should allow, fingers sharpening into something that ended in points.

"You fight like a girl," it said, and the words came out wet, like they'd been dragged through something.

I went for the door. My hands found the handle and it wouldn't turn, wouldn't budge, no matter how hard I threw myself against it.

It swung at me. I dropped and rolled and heard the mattress tear behind me, stuffing spilling out in a soft cloud. Another swing caught the mirror on the wall and the whole thing shattered, glass raining down in long silver streaks.

I did not want that thing's claws anywhere near my skin. Not after what happened the last time something in this place had touched me while I dreamed.

There was a window. I didn't think about it. I threw myself through it and hit grass instead of stone, and I kept running the second my feet found ground, because whatever was behind me hadn't stopped.

It hadn't stopped at all.

"What did I ever do to you?" I shouted back over my shoulder, my lungs already burning.
"What do you even want from me?"

"You dared give me hope."

Its voice came closer than I wanted it to. "Why do you keep reaching for me?"

I risked a glance back and regretted it instantly. It was gaining, its long legs eating up ground faster than mine ever could.

"You're the one who keeps showing up in my dreams," I said, my voice cracking with the effort of both running and talking. "Who are you?"

"This isn't your dreamscape," it said. "It's mine. I left it open, waiting for a kindred spirit to find me. To free me." Something in its voice twisted, ragged with an emotion I couldn't name. "You've given me hope twice now. I'll be damned if I let it happen a third time. You need to die."

My foot caught on something, a root or a stone, and I went down hard, the meadow grass tearing at my palms as I hit.

It was on me before I could get back up.

Its claws came for my stomach, and I grabbed whatever part of it I could reach, holding on with everything I had even as the points sank in, even as the pain bloomed white and total through my middle.

"Maybe you're locked up because you're a psychotic monster," I gasped, blood already slicking my hands where I gripped its arm. "You're trying to kill me because I what? Because I—"

"It helps," it said, almost thoughtful now, "that you happen to be one of her special creations."

Eyes began forming where there had been nothing. Slow at first, then all at once, brilliant green, too bright, too alive for something built out of shadow and rage.

At the same damn time too, a nose started to form.

"I want to hurt you," it said. "And I want to relish it. I want to see it and I want to smell it."

It drove the claws deeper. I felt them find my stomach properly this time, slicing through without much resistance at all, and I prayed to whatever was left of the goddess in me that my hands would spark, that the hum would rise, that anything at all would happen to make this stop.

Nothing came.

The creature paused.

Something shifted across whatever passed for its face, shock breaking through the malice, and it leaned in close to the wound it had just carved, studying it like it had found something it hadn't expected.

"What in the world," it murmured.

It pulled back and looked at me properly, and whatever it saw made it smile, slow and wide and entirely too pleased with itself.

"Interesting," it said.

Then it was gone, and I was left alone in the meadow, blood soaking into grass that shouldn't exist anywhere real, my hands pressed uselessly over a wound that refused to close.

I forced myself upright, my hands slick and shaking, and I stood there in the middle of that too-perfect meadow shouting at nothing.

"Hello! Let me out, you bastard! Let me out!"

Nothing answered. No door appeared. No window to throw myself through. Just grass, endless and silver under some light that didn't come from any sun I recognized, and my own voice bouncing back at me with nowhere to go.

Then the ground dropped out from under everything.

I didn't fall so much as the world simply reassembled itself around me, the meadow bleeding away into something colder, older, made of stone instead of grass. I stood in what looked like the remains of a courtyard, ruined columns rising up on either side, and in the center of it, bound with rope that glowed faintly at every knot, knelt a bald man with green eyes.

His eyes.

I knew them. I'd just been staring into a pair exactly like them, set in a face made of shadow and rage, moments before I'd been thrown out of that meadow entirely. Except this face was whole. Human, or close enough to it, gaunt and beautiful in some terrible way, his skin pale under whatever light lit this place.

Women moved around him in slow, deliberate formation, shifting positions like dancers rehearsing something sacred, their robes changing color as they turned, one moment white, the next black, then red, then gone entirely into something I couldn't name.

A woman stepped forward from among them. I couldn't make out her face no matter how hard I tried, the details sliding away every time I focused, the same way my mother's face had slid away in that other dream. But her voice carried across the ruined courtyard clear as anything.

"You have humiliated me," she said. "And just because you are my blood does not mean you will escape punishment."

The bald man lifted his head. "Mother—"

"Tonight," she said, cutting him off without raising her voice at all, "I intend to curse you. And your acolytes, since all of you want a new religion so badly." Something in her tone went colder than stone. "Have it, then."

She raised one hand.

"I curse *****, " she said, "first of my womb, and my greatest pain."

What was that? A certain thing she said seemed to glitch out.

The thoughts did not stay very long however as the boy screams pierced the air.

He screamed. Not in pain, not yet, but in something worse, something closer to grief, his bound hands clawing uselessly at the ropes holding him.

"I did this for you," he said, and his voice cracked entirely apart on the words.
"Everything. All of it. For you. For your love."

The light around them began to curdle, gold bleeding out of the air and turning dark, and I stood frozen at the edge of it all, watching a mother unmake her own son, unable to look away.

Was this the thing that was trying to kill me? Was this a memory?

Only for the woman to turn back and say, "You shouldn't be here child. Him giving you access to this memory is not by mistake. He has probably figured out what you are. Which is why I avoided contact with you for so long."

Was this also a memory? I wondered.

I had to know. "Are you actually talking to me?"

"Of course, Bonnie."

I was going to say something else when I woke up gasping with Lysander's face hovering over mine.

To heal a Rogue

LYSANDER

I woke deep into the night to find the lamps still lit, soft gold spilling across the room, and my first thought, absurdly, was whether the light would keep Bonnie from sleeping well.

I got up quietly and crossed the room to the nearest one, and when I reached the second lamp, the one closest to the side of the bed where she'd turned her head, she stirred slightly at the shift in the room. I froze, half bent over her, my hand hovering near her hair before I caught myself. If she woke up now and found me leaning over her like that, she'd have every right to call me exactly what it would look like.

I straightened and left her be, moving instead toward the stack of books the sentinels had retrieved from the library earlier that day. Better to occupy my hands with something useful than stand there watching her sleep like some lovesick fool with no self-control.

I opened the first volume and found myself deep in an account of the old grievance between the Drakori and our own people. Nothing violent at first, from what the pages described. Just a slow, corrosive kind of pride. The Drakori apparently held tight to the belief that Selene, for all her celestial standing, had only ever reflected borrowed light.

That her power came secondhand from Aureon himself, the way moonlight is nothing more than sunlight bent and softened.

It only worsened when she took a mortal lover and bore him children. Neither the gods nor the Drakori accepted those children as anything worth respecting. Only the wolves did, embracing them fully as their own, and the Drakori grew louder in their scorn, insisting their own god had never lowered himself to plant his seed in anything mortal. Werewolf society had been small then, nothing compared to the sprawling reach of the Drakori, and that imbalance apparently fed a belief among them that Selene would never hold a devoted people for long.

That belief, more than anything, seemed to have wounded her firstborn. Lycaon. And if his own mother wouldn't be respected willingly, he'd apparently decided the Drakori would learn to fear her instead. Even firebreathers, the book noted, stood little chance against a mortal wielding a celestial's raw power.

That was when I heard Bonnie moan.

I glanced over, a small, involuntary smile pulling at my mouth. Someone was having quite the dream.

Then I saw the marks.

Two small punctures, unmistakable, blooming dark red against the pale skin of her throat, blood beading and sliding down toward the pillow beneath her.

Every part of me went cold at once.

That wasn't normal.

I was at her side before I'd consciously decided to move, my hands on her shoulders, shaking her gently.

"Bonnie. Are you alright? Bonnie."

She didn't wake. Her breathing had gone ragged, ratcheting up fast, her whole body starting to tremble beneath my hands, and I kept my voice low at first, still trying to reason my way into thinking this was something ordinary. A nightmare. Nothing more.

Then her hand came up in her sleep, and fresh cuts opened across her forearm, thin red lines splitting her skin like something invisible had dragged claws across it.

Yeah... that was definitely not ordinary.

"Retainer!" I shouted, my voice tearing through the quiet room. "Someone get in here now!"

The door unlocked from outside almost immediately, and the retainer burst through with two sentinels close behind him, Delta trailing just after. The moment they saw her, saw the blood now spreading dark and wet across the front of her red gown, blooming from somewhere beneath her stomach, nobody needed further instruction.

"We need to get her to the infirmary," the retainer said.

I didn't argue. I gathered her up myself, as careful as my shaking hands allowed, and we ran.

I kept saying her name the entire way, over and over, some desperate rhythm I couldn't stop myself from repeating even as they laid her on the stretcher, and for one brief, blinding second her eyes opened. Her hand found mine, fingers curling weak around my palm.

Then her eyes closed again, and her hand slipped free.

The head healer met us at the doors, already barking instructions to the staff behind her.

"We'll need to take her in for emergency surgery," she said, her eyes sweeping over the wounds with quick, professional focus. "The origin of these injuries reads as magical."

"If that's the case," I said, "you'll bring in a witch. One you trust completely. I want the source of this identified and dealt with. I am just about such of this shit."

"Of course, Alpha Lysander."

They wheeled her through a set of doors that swung shut behind them, and I stood there in the corridor, useless and furious, as I watched the space where she'd disappeared.

Once again. Something had happened that I hadn't seen coming, hadn't been able to prepare for, hadn't been fast enough to stop.

Delta stood beside me, quiet for a moment before she spoke.

"Alpha Lysander. Can I say something?"

"Go ahead."

"Something similar happened to her before," she said. "I didn't think much of it at the time. I didn't connect it to anything magical. But while you were with the royal Beta earlier, she seemed to be caught in some kind of dream. Water was coming out of her nose, of all things. When she woke, she was disoriented. She even attacked me." She paused, guilt flickering across her face. "I should have said something sooner because it did give magic. I'm sorry I wasn't more proactive about it."

"You're not the only one at fault here," I said.

My mind had already snapped toward Johann, toward every calculated, self-serving move he'd made since the moment his father's body hit that library floor. This bore his fingerprints even if I couldn't yet prove it.

"Watch over her for me," I said to Delta. "Please."

"Of course."

I turned and started walking, and the retainer fell into step beside me almost instantly.

"Where are you going, Alpha Lysander?"

"The prison cell," I said. "Where they're holding the rogue."

To see if he was still alive and of course, torture information out of him before whatsoever witch was doing this locked in again.

To heal a Rogue

LYSANDER

A few sentinels fell into step behind me the moment I turned down toward the lower levels, and I didn't bother telling them to stay back. There was nothing I could say now that would send them away. I was too important a body to leave unguarded, apparently.

The air changed the deeper we went, growing thick and sour, something metallic threading through it that clung to the back of my throat. The guards posted outside the deepest block straightened when they saw me coming and fell into formation without needing instruction, leading the way further down.

One of them glanced back at me as we walked. "The air down here does something to the mind, Alpha Lysander. Spend enough time in it, and it starts working the truth loose from a man whether he wants it out or not. Might be worth wearing a mask, if you intend to stay long."

"I don't need one."

"Where would the best tools be?" I asked instead.

He led me to a section of wall with a small, unremarkable seam running through it, and when he pressed against the right spot, it swung open to reveal a shallow compartment lined with implements that were meant for the cruelest of punishments. I picked three.

The wall sealed itself shut behind me, and we continued on until we reached a cell set apart from the others, with heavier bars and a thicker door.

The rogue sat with his back against the far wall, and I noticed the careful, deliberate way he was breathing, slow in, slow out, like a man counting down something.

It probably had something to do with the air he was taking in now.

"Hello," I said.

He looked up and smiled at me, easy and unbothered, like we were meeting at a dinner party rather than a cell three levels beneath a royal estate.

"I see it's my time to die," he said.

The sentinel unlocked the door and handed me the keys directly. "We'll wait out here, Alpha Lysander."

I stepped inside alone.

"Killing you isn't in my plans tonight," I said. "If I'm being honest, I'd half forgotten you existed until your friends decided they couldn't stand the thought of my healer staying alive again."

That got his attention. His eyes sharpened. "What does that mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean," I said. "Whoever helped you infiltrate this kingdom, twice now, is currently panicking enough to use witches on people while they sleep. You should count yourself lucky you were tucked away down here, in a cell built to fry the mind rather than protect it. The goddess only knows what would have happened to you if you'd been left somewhere quiet and safe to dream in."

I crouched slightly, meeting his eyes.

"So if I were you," I said, "I'd start talking. The moment your allies are exposed, there's a real chance you walk away from this alive. Hold my hand through this, and I make sure of it. Refuse, and I promise you a version of hell that your friends will finish for me."

"Let's start simple," I said. "What's your name, rogue?"

"Fuck yourself."

"Well," I said, pulling a glove onto my hand slowly, and just deliberately to fuck with his head, "thank you for at least attempting to make this easy for the both of us." I let a slow smile spread across my face. "Truthfully, I was hoping you'd resist. Gives me an excuse."

I dropped the tools and pulled the second glove on before crossing the cell.

He fought as much as the chains allowed. Which wasn't much.

Every desperate lunge ended the same way, the restraints snapping taut and yanking him back before he could reach me or avoid me. Metal rattled with every failed attempt.

I stepped in anyway.

My first punch twisted his head sideways. The second landed before he could recover, driving straight into his cheekbone. Bone cracked against my knuckles, sharp enough to split the skin across them, but I barely felt it. I kept going, each blow measured, each one stripping away another layer of defiance.

Blood dripped from his mouth. One eye swelled shut. His breathing turned ragged, interrupted by wet, choking coughs.

When his knees threatened to give out, I caught the chain running from his wrists, wound it once around his throat, and pulled just until the metal bit into his skin.

Not enough to kill him.

Just enough to remind him that even the air in his lungs was mine to allow.

I held him there for a heartbeat before letting the tension ease.

By the time he finally spoke, every word had to force its way through split lips and a throat still raw from the pressure.

"It's David," he rasped. "My... my name is David."

I stepped back.

"Now," I said. "Who do you work for?"

"I won't betray the cause."

"Rogue factions exist because of prejudice," I said. "Because of the hell our lower castes have endured for generations. I understand that far more than you'd expect from someone standing where I'm standing right now. But how does your cause differ from ours if someone smaller always has to take the fall for it?"

"I chose this," he said.

"I doubt that." I crouched again, level with him. "I suspect I already know who's behind it. But suspicion isn't proof, and I can't build a case on guesses. Give me his name, and everything else gets forgiven. The attempt on my life. The attempt on hers." My voice dropped, harder now. "Deny me one more time, and I promise you I will make the rest of tonight hurt in ways you haven't imagined yet. And I'm not exaggerating about the witches working these walls. It's exactly why I'm this desperate. It's exactly why I'll use whatever means necessary to pull this out of you."

I nodded toward the tools on the floor.

"That flask holds pure wolfsbane," I said. "This is a garrotte, though I'd have to be careful with your throat specifically, your healing factor won't keep pace with it fast enough to be forgiving." I picked up the last item. "And these are thumbscrews. My personal favorite, honestly, because I can repeat the process as many times as it takes to get the answer I actually want."

David's breathing quickened, his eyes darting toward the tools, but he said nothing.

"I think you believe we have some grand mastermind pulling strings," he said finally, forcing the words out. "We don't. You big wolves assume your titles and your buildings protect you from everything. We've been planning this for a very long time. Alone."

"I don't believe that," I said. "The first attempt was amateurish. Coming back a second time was worse. It was reckless, almost suicidal. Someone with experience was behind this. It wasn't you."

Before he could pull away, I clamped the thumbscrew over his hand. The chains pinned his wrist in place, leaving him nowhere to go.

I tightened the screw.

One slow turn at first.

His breath hitched and he bit at his power lips.

Then I turned another.

The first scream tore out of him, raw enough to echo off the walls. I didn't stop. The metal creaked as I gave it another measured twist.

"You know what I want," I said, my voice carrying easily over his cries. "Give it to me."

His breathing dissolved into ragged, panicked gulps. Sweat beaded across his forehead, mixing with the blood running from his split lip.

"Even if I gave you a name," he managed between strained breaths, "it wouldn't matter."

I waited.

"It would be a lie," he said. "Because there's nothing linking us to anyone."

"Why protect him," I said. "What could he possibly offer you that's worth this? He's not in line for any throne. He can't protect you. I can. I only need something to work with. Let me pin this on him properly."

"Like I said," David ground out, "we have nothing."

I turned the lever again, and again, and his screaming filled the small stone room until it echoed back at me off every wall.

I reached for the wolfsbane flask.

"Thirsty?" I said, uncorking it. "I'd hoped to be patient with you tonight. I find I can't manage it anymore." I studied him. "Siding with the most privileged man in this entire society. That's insane, even for you. What did he even offer? Money? Is that what rogues want now?"

"Money? Please. I die standing for what I believe in," David said, and shut his eyes.

I poured the wolfsbane directly onto his hands where the thumbscrew had already broken skin.

His scream tore through the cell in a way that made even the sentinels outside shift audibly. He collapsed to the ground, convulsing, his whole body seizing against the chains, and something in me recoiled at the sheer cruelty of what I was watching myself do. I pushed it down. There wasn't room for restraint. Not tonight, not with Bonnie bleeding out on a stretcher somewhere above us. Hesitation was useless now.

"Who are you working with?" I asked again.

"I'll talk," he gasped. "I'll talk."

"Finally," I said. "Common sense. Talk. All of it."

He started laughing instead, wet and broken, blood mixing into the sound.

"Before I ever came here," he said, "I already knew the fate waiting for me. I prepared for it." His laugh cracked wider. "I was wondering when it would kick in. Seems your torture helped speed things along nicely."

"Whatever happens to me now," he said, "I know it's going to be worth it. The alliance against rank finally gets what it's always wanted. You privileged pricks are going to learn to fear us." He laughed again, louder, manic now. "You have no idea what's coming for all of you."

Blood began leaking from the corners of his eyes.

Then from his nose. His mouth.

"What the fuck?" Was all I could mutter.

"I poisoned myself," he screamed, laughing through it, blood spilling down his chin in thick streams. "I poisoned myself!"

No fucking way! I was moving before I finished processing it, throwing the cell door open and shouting down the corridor.

"Get this man to the infirmary now! He's trying to take the coward's way out!"

To heal a Rogue

EDELINA

I dialed the number myself with no preamble, or patience left in me for pleasantries.

"Why," I demanded the second the line connected, "are you threatening my son?"

"We were going to call you next, actually," the man on the other end said, unbothered by my tone in a way that irritated me more than outright defiance would have. "We're not the sort of people to be messed with, Luna. If that is of course what you still currently identify as."

I half scoffed. Was that his excuse of threatening me?

"You'd better keep that useless pride of yours in check," I said. "We need each other right now, whether either of us particularly enjoys the arrangement. Act up again, and understand I can play a far crueller game than you're prepared for."

"Did you call to threaten us, then?"

He was one to talk after pulling the same exact card.

"No," I said. "I called to give you exactly what you wanted. The bite."

The silence stretched a beat on his end and I could just smell some calculation happening behind it.

"Where can we meet?" He finally caved.

"Where we first met."

I didn't need to say the name out loud. He already knew. The name was Bottles; That grimy little human club we'd first arranged this entire alliance inside, chosen precisely because no self-respecting werewolf would ever think to look there.

I ended the call and sat with the phone in my lap for a moment, staring at the needle still taped into the back of my hand, the tube running up toward the bag hanging beside the bed. I pulled it free myself, wincing as the tape tugged at skin gone thin and papery in places it never used to be, and pressed a folded tissue against the small bead of blood that welled up in its place.

Getting dressed took longer than it should have. My hands weren't as steady as I wanted them to be tonight, and every motion felt like it cost me more than it once had. But I managed it. I wore a black dress, with a dark coat over it, and esmured my hair was pinned back into something presentable. Only then did I make my way out to the reception desk with as much composure as I could still perform.

The nurse on duty rose the second she saw me crossing the floor.

"Luna Edelina, you can't possibly be thinking of leaving for somewhere tonight. Your levels haven't stabilized, and the doctor specifically—"

"I am dying," I said, cutting her off before she could finish whatever rehearsed concern she'd been building toward. "That does not mean this facility gets to become my hospice before I've even finished the business of living in it. I will be back for treatment. Tonight however, I intend to enjoy something entirely vain and entirely mine. Life."

She hesitated, glancing toward the phone on her desk like she was debating whether to call someone higher up the chain than herself.

"But... where are you going," she asked instead, "for your own safety? You're royal blood, Luna, and given the circumstances with the King—"

"You needn't trouble yourself over whether I end up dead in some gutter tonight," I said. "If the royals genuinely cared what happened to me, I wouldn't be housed in this backwater excuse for a healer's shack in the first place."

I expected that to be enough. But I was wrong. She still didn't drop it. There seemed to be some stubborn professional instinct keeping her rooted, and something about the persistence of it needled at me harder than it should have. It didn't feel like concern anymore. It felt like surveillance dressed up in a soft voice and a clipboard.

It was the way she looked at me that finally made the irritation settle into something colder.

Her eyes flicked over me, taking inventory of my clothes, my shoes, the small bag I'd already packed. She wasn't looking at me like a healer assessing a patient.

She was looking at me like someone trying to determine whether I was about to become a problem.

"You've asked me where I'm going three times."

Her expression tightened. "I have a responsibility for your safety."

"No." I smiled faintly. "You have a responsibility for my medical condition. Those are two very different things."

"I don't think you understand the situation."

"I understand it perfectly. I believe it is you who should ask yourself," I said, low, "why it feels like I'm being watched especially now that I am trying to leave this place. Is there perhaps... something I should know?"

"Oh..."

That finally landed. Her expression shifted, uncertain now, and she slid the sign-out sheet toward me without another word. I signed it with a flourish I didn't feel and walked out into the cold night air, already dialing for a taxi on my way to the curb.

"Bottles," I told the driver once I'd settled into the back seat.

"How will you be paying tonight, ma'am?"

"Card," I said. "Let's hope they're not all frozen."

He laughed at that. But I partly meant them. With how swift and cruelly Cornelius had moved, I would not be surprised if that was now a fate that had befallen me as well.

I looked down at the back of my hand while we drove, specifically at the vein still faintly dark and throbbing where the needle had been, threaded through with something that hadn't looked like ordinary blood in longer than I cared to admit. My mind wandered, unbidden, the way it always did on quiet car rides, back to my first wedding.

How foolish I'd been then. Young, dazzled, utterly convinced I was something special to a man who had already buried several wives before me and would bury several more after. The immortal progenitor of the very curse now eating me alive from the inside.

He'd been kind enough at the start. That was the cruel trick of it, the way men like him always managed to be kind enough at the start. My first night as his bride had unfolded exactly the way every young girl is promised her first night should, and somewhere in the soft aftermath of it, I'd told him, breathless and hopeful, that I wanted children.

He'd laughed. Actually laughed, right in my face, and told me the goddess would never allow something like that to happen for people like us.

Not long after, he'd grown thoroughly disillusioned with his own crown and simply left, abandoning me to clean up the wreckage of a throne I hadn't asked to inherit. I discovered later, from women who should have warned me sooner, that I hadn't been the first wife handed that exact fate. It had been naive of everyone involved in arranging my marriage to assume my story would somehow end differently from theirs.

But I'd made something useful out of the ruin anyway. I'd taken the Lycan Queen's seat and every ounce of wealth and access that came attached to it, and I'd used it to work my way, patient and precise, into the werewolf royal bloodline itself. I had come so close to accomplishing what the Lycan King himself, for all his celestial blood, had never managed to finish.

"We're here," the driver said, and I blinked myself back into the present.

The neon sign glowed pink and blue against the dark, Bottles spelled out in letters that flickered slightly on the second O. I opened my wallet and reached first for the De'Lune card out of pure habit, then stopped myself before my fingers closed around it. I had no idea yet what Cornelius might have done to that account before he died, and I wasn't in the mood to discover it mid-transaction, in front of a stranger, at a club I had no business being photographed near.

I pulled my second card instead. The black one under the name Edelina Grivas, the identity I'd spent years quietly building while pretending, to anyone who asked, that I was Alpha Sterling's own daughter.

The driver swiped it, handed it back without comment which told me that it has worked, and I stepped out into the night.

My phone rang the moment I crossed the threshold of the club, the bass already pulsing through the walls as human bodies swayed beneath lights that had no idea what had just walked into their midst.

"I'm here," I said, pressing the phone to my ear.

"Someone's following you," the voice on the other end said, flat and matter of fact.

"Do you handle him," I asked, "or shall I?"

He laughed. "We assumed you'd brought him along yourself. But if that isn't the case, you won't mind if we kill him... Right?"

"As long as you gather whatever information you can about who he answers to first," I said, "I couldn't care less what happens to him afterward."

"Proceed as you would have anyway," he said. "We'll handle the rest."

Chapter 66: The gift of the bite

EDELINA

I ended the call and approached the receptionist near the back hallway, a young woman who recognized me instantly, her expression carefully blank in the professional way of someone paid well to notice nothing at all. She handed over a keycard without a word.

The room I found waited behind a door marked only with a small brass number, and when I stepped inside, I found a thin, near-translucent sheet dividing the space, one of the three rogue chiefs seated behind it, flanked by two men standing at his shoulders.

He had been the one I had been conversing with and I never missed a scent.

I sat in the chair across from him.

"What's the sheet for?" I asked.

"Ambience," he said, "for what's about to happen." He leaned forward slightly, elbows on his knees. "How do we get the bite?"

I bared my teeth, felt them lengthen and shift into something considerably less human, canines sharpening past anything a werewolf's mouth produced.

"It's right here," I said. "Who am I biting?"

He turned to the man standing at his left, who stepped forward and began rolling up his sleeve, offering his bare forearm like it was a gift he'd been waiting his whole life to give.

"You should understand," I said, "there's a real chance he doesn't survive this."

"Our men are strong," the chief said, unbothered. "But you'll bite the second one as well. Just in case."

I took the offered arm and looked the man directly in the face before I bit down. He clearly believed this moment was the answer to every grievance he'd ever carried in his life, entirely unaware of what surviving my bloodline had already cost the very blood now running through my own veins.

"You'll probably regret this," I told him, quiet, almost gentle, and then I bit down properly.

His blood hit my tongue rich and untainted, and something in me drank it in like it might actually fix whatever the curse had broken inside me, the venom flowing the opposite direction even as his taste flooded warm and metallic through my mouth. He screamed almost immediately, his knees buckling, and I kept drinking until I felt another cough building low in my own chest, sharp and insistent, and only then did I let him drop, convulsing, onto the floor at my feet.

The chief nodded toward the second man. "Go on. Get the gift as well."

That one hesitated, his weight shifting nervously from one foot to the other.

"Something wrong?" the chief asked.

"No, Chief."

"Then why are you standing there like a man who's forgotten why he came?"

The man swallowed. "I was only thinking."

"Thinking about what?"

His eyes dropped.

The chief's expression hardened. "Don't tell me you're suddenly having second thoughts about the cause you claimed to believe in."

"No, Chief. That's not what I meant."

"Then prove it."

"Yeah," the man said quickly. "Yeah... This is for the cause."

He stepped forward then and offered his hand. I caught his wrist and bit down, another rich, intoxicating rush of blood flooding my tongue.

Then the door behind me slammed open.

A body was thrown through it, hitting the floor hard enough to draw every eye in the room.

I looked up mid-bite.

A man lay sprawled across the floor, shirtless, his skin an angry, blistered red from what looked like severe chemical burns. Wolfsbane, most likely. I knew the particular pattern well enough to recognize it.

But it was the tattoo stretched across his bare chest that made me freeze.

Plenty small useless words, inked in the unmistakable insignia of the De'Lune crown.

De'Lune Secret Service.

I let go of the second rogue, despite everything in me wanting to keep drinking, and crossed the room toward the man on the floor.

"Seems you recognize him," the rogue who'd thrown him in said, watching my face carefully.

I grabbed the spy by the throat and hauled him partway upright. "Who sent you to follow me?"

He coughed, blood flecking his lips. "Conspiring with rogues. You're our fucking Queen!"

I laughed, short and cold, the sound bouncing off the walls of that cramped little room.

"So it was Bradley," I said.

His eyes widened, just slightly, just enough to confirm everything I needed to know, and I snapped his neck in one clean motion before he could say another word.

The rogue nearest me raised his gun immediately, aiming it square at my chest. "Why would you do that? We could have used him for information amongst other things."

"I doubt it," I said, entirely unbothered by the weapon. "I simply hate that Beta bastard, and killing him felt satisfying enough on its own merits."

I rose to my feet, facing the rogue down despite the gun still pointed at me.

"The last thing any of you freedom fighters want," I said, "is to get tangled up with a nationalist like Bradley. He would relish nothing more than wiping every last one of you off the map, and he's very good at making that particular kind of dream come true." I nodded toward the corpse cooling on the floor. "He almost certainly already knows about this location. A werewolf from the royal secret military tailing me here means this entire meeting was a suicide mission for him the moment it began."

"What about you," the rogue asked, his gun hand faltering slightly. "Wouldn't he already suspect something's off with you? Especially if a soldier he sent ends up dead?"

I laughed again, genuine this time. "Lucky for me, I happen to be a very privileged bitch. He'll need considerably more than hearsay and half formed suspicion to lock me away properly. Which is exactly why I just killed him before he could report even more."

From behind the translucent sheet, the chief spoke, calm and decisive. "Drop your gun. Get rid of the body. If what she's saying holds true, we have to abandon this location tonight."

"Listen to him," I said, and the rogue finally lowered his weapon, moving reluctantly toward the corpse to begin the grim work of disposing of it.

I turned back toward the sheet. "Our business here is finished. Do not contact me again."

"Of course," the chief said. "Though our table remains open, should you ever find yourself in need of another arrangement."

"I do hope," I said, already turning for the door, "that I never find myself that desperate again."

I stepped out and shut the door firmly behind me, then made my way toward the back exit rather than the front, taking no chances tonight of all nights. I suspected the receptionist back at the infirmary had been another one of Bradley's quiet little informants, and I had no intention of returning there before I'd had time to properly consider what came next.

Whatever remained of my quiet, indulgent little wait for death was finished now. There was work to do. For Johann. For the throne that still, somehow, against every obstacle thrown in our path tonight, had to remain within reach.

For my son.

For my salvation.

Chapter 67: A King's Secret

LYSANDER

The sentinels hauled David between them, his entire body still convulsing violently enough to make their grip look precarious. Foam and blood gathered thickly at the corner of his mouth, spilling down his chin as another seizure tore through him.

The healers met us halfway down the corridor.

They already had a stretcher waiting.

Platinum chains lay coiled across its surface, prepared before anyone had even lowered David onto it. Someone must have sent word the moment I shouted for them. No one

stopped to ask what had happened. No one stared at the blood or the man fighting for his life in the middle of the night.

They had simply seen the emergency and moved.

The moment David was secured in those chains, the healers took over, wheeling him toward the infirmary while the sentinels followed until they were certain he was in capable hands.

I went with them as far as the infirmary doors.

Then I stopped.

There was nothing more I could do for David.

He had chosen death rather than give me a name. Whatever information he had carried with him was partly gone now, buried somewhere beneath the poison ravaging his body. I had already squeezed everything I could from him, and there was no point pretending otherwise.

So my mind moved on to better things.

My mind had moved on to Bonnie.

The only person in this entire estate whose survival I actually cared about tonight.

The healer who had been attending to her found me before I had taken three steps back into the corridor.

"We managed to secure a witch," she said, slightly breathless. "Despite the hour. She's nearly here."

Relief came so quickly it almost felt like another kind of pain.

"I want to be there while she works."

"Of course, Alpha Lysander."

She turned immediately, and I followed her through another set of doors and down the short passage leading toward Bonnie's space.

I made myself ask the question before I looked at her.

"How is she?"

"Stable." The healer replied in quick succession.

The word should have eased something inside me. But it didn't.

"Nothing active is happening right now," the healer continued. "But we still don't know what caused the episode. The witch's diagnostics should tell us whether this was truly a magical attack, rather than relying on the hypothesis we have formed. If it was, she may be able to identify the nature of the spell and, hopefully, tell us how to prevent it from happening again."

She hesitated.

"At best, she may even be able to help us determine who was responsible."

"Then bring her here as quickly as possible."

"I will."

She glanced toward the room.

"You're welcome to stay with your mate until she arrives."

I nodded.

The healer left, and I pushed open the door.

Bonnie lay exactly where they'd left her.

For a moment, I stood there.

She was asleep, or something close enough to sleep that I didn't trust it. Her face was pale against the pillow, her lashes resting motionless against her cheeks. Her breathing was steady, but too shallow for my liking, each rise of her chest seeming smaller than the one before it.

I crossed the room.

When I took her hand, I did it carefully, avoiding the cuts along her forearm. The wounds had already been cleaned and covered with a thin layer of pale salve that carried the faint scent of crushed herbs.

She should have been able to heal them herself. That was what I thought at least. I still did not know much about how healers fully functioned.

Because under ordinary circumstances, those cuts would barely have lasted long enough to scar.

She was not only an Omega, too.

But it seemed whatever had happened tonight had taken something from her.

Perhaps it was just my own fear taking precedence, but I could feel that much even without knowing exactly what it was.

Her power should have been fighting its way back already. Instead, there was a strange weakness clinging to her, something that seemed to exist beneath the physical damage, beyond anything the healers had been able to touch.

I sat beside her.

For several seconds, I said nothing.

Then I tightened my fingers around hers, careful not to hurt her.

"I'm sorry." The words sounded pathetic the moment they left my mouth.

I looked down at her.

"I keep failing to keep you safe."

My throat tightened.

I'd spent years believing strength meant being the one who stood between danger and everyone under my protection. I'd believed that if I was powerful enough, ruthless enough, feared enough, nothing could reach the people who mattered to me.

And yet Bonnie was lying unconscious in front of me.

Again.

My thumb moved slowly across the back of her hand.

"I should have known something was wrong."

There was no answer—only the quiet rhythm of her breathing.

I lowered my head, pressing her hand against my mouth.

"I should have been there."

The door remained closed.

The witch still hadn't arrived.

And for the first time in longer than I cared to admit, I found myself afraid that all the strength I possessed might still not be enough to keep the one person I couldn't afford to lose alive.

The thoughts sat heavier in my chest than I expected them to.

I'd meant them as something small, something private, but they had lodged themselves beneath my ribs like a splinter I couldn't work free. I kept staring at Bonnie's hand in mine, at the faint rise and fall of her chest, wondering how many times I could tell myself I was protecting her before the words stopped meaning anything.

Footsteps approached from the corridor.

I recognized their weight before I turned.

It was Beta Bradley.

"I heard the rogue poisoned himself," he said.

"He did."

"I'm certain the healers will salvage something from him regardless." Bradley's expression remained composed, but something sharpened behind his eyes. "If a rogue is willing to die rather than surrender his secrets, we're dealing with something considerably more dangerous than a handful of disgruntled malcontents. Fanatics, most likely."

He paused.

"I intend to bring in a delicate to assist in determining exactly what we're dealing with."

I did not mind that at all. In fact, I fully agreed. So I made it vocal.

"I agree."

Bradley nodded and turned toward the door.

Something in me refused to let him leave.

"Wait."

He stopped.

"I want to ask you something."

"Anything, Your Majesty."

I looked down at Bonnie for a moment before returning my attention to him.

"What did my uncle actually tell you when he decided to hand his seat to me instead of my cousin Johann?"

To heal a Rogue

LYSANDER

Bradley's expression barely changed.

"Likely the same thing he told you. I am sure you know by now that Alpha Cornelius was infertile, and that Johann was born of another man entirely."

The words still sounded strange when spoken aloud. Not because I didn't know them. But because they had once been the sort of thing that could destroy a kingdom if spoken in the wrong room.

Bradley folded his hands behind his back.

"It is a controversial truth. I... understand why your uncle, goddess bless his soul, chose not to turn it into a public spectacle. Even at the end of his life, an Alpha keeps his pride close."

"I imagine tongues would have wagged regardless."

"Of course." His mouth tightened faintly. "Thankfully, propaganda spreads easily, and Johann makes it remarkably simple for people to believe the worst of him without much prompting."

He paused.

"I was tasked with quietly circulating doubt about his suitability. Nothing overt. Nothing that could be traced back to the Crown. The intention was simply to make you a more palatable choice once your name was put forward as heir."

"So you helped prepare the kingdom to accept me."

"I helped make the transition easier."

"Is it easy though? My dear cousin constantly challenges it."

"I noticed. But it is nothing drastic yet. We will deal with that if it ever reaches that stage. We just have to wait for the time to come."

I studied him.

"Is there a reason you're pressing me on all of this tonight, Your Majesty?"

"I think you already suspect what I'm getting at."

Bradley waited. He definitely knew something. But chose to stay quiet for whatever reason was best known to him. Probably to prevent the ideas of treason in my own head.

So I bit. "Johann had a hand in my uncle's death. I know you know it."

His face remained unreadable. "We cannot operate on assumption alone. Only hard fact should guide us."

"He's tried undermining me multiple times now. I won't insult either of us by pretending otherwise." My voice hardened as I continued. "I have more than enough reason to believe he's behind the rogues gaining access to this estate twice in two days. Maybe those are assumptions. But I know you suspect it too, whatever your official position requires you to say aloud."

For the first time, Bradley glanced toward the door.

When he spoke again, his voice was quieter.

"I do suspect foul play."

He looked back at me.

"It's precisely why I've already begun quietly investigating both him and Queen Edelina."

My brows drew together.

"Now that you mention it, I haven't laid eyes on her since my uncle's death. Is she truly that ill?"

"She's ill." Bradley hesitated. "But that's not the whole story."

I waited.

"Cornelius had subtly excommunicated her before he died. Nothing formal enough to cause a scandal. Nothing that would prevent her from appearing publicly, since he never shamed her outright."

His gaze darkened.

"And yet... she hasn't come. Not once. It is fascinating to think about."

"Perhaps because she's too sick?"

"Perhaps."

He gave me a measured look.

"But I know she's still capable of showing her face if she wishes to."

The implication settled between us.

Edelina wasn't merely absent.

She was choosing to remain absent.

Bradley straightened.

"You needn't carry all of this yourself tonight, Your Majesty. I intend to see it resolved."

He bowed and left.

I watched him disappear through the doorway.

As he crossed the corridor, he passed a woman coming from the opposite direction. She was dressed entirely in black, her dark hair falling loose around her shoulders. Even from where I was, I noticed her eyes.

An unusually vivid cornflower blue.

They seemed almost unnaturally bright beneath the dim corridor lights.

Bradley exchanged a few words with her. Whatever he said made her laugh, a soft, easy sound that seemed strangely out of place in a palace where someone had nearly died less than an hour ago.

Then Bradley disappeared around the corner.

The woman continued toward my room.

The healer entered first, with the stranger trailing behind her.

The woman bowed immediately upon entering.

"Hello, Your Majesty. My name is Willow," she introduced herself. "From the witch house of Shelter. It's my pleasure to serve the royal family."

I wasn't entirely certain how one was supposed to respond to that sort of formal deference, so I settled for a small nod.

"Thank you."

Her attention shifted to Bonnie.

"Is this her?"

"Yes."

"May I begin?"

"Of course."

Willow set her bag beside the bed and opened it.

She worked quickly, pulling out several small glass vials and cloth pouches before arranging them on the bedside table. Her fingers moved with the practiced ease of someone who had performed the same ritual many times before.

She measured a dark powder into a shallow dish, added several drops from one of the vials, then stirred the mixture with the end of a small wooden stick.

The liquid changed almost immediately.

It became translucent, then faintly luminous.

When Willow seemed satisfied with the consistency, she dipped her thumb into the compound and leaned over Bonnie.

I watched as she pressed it gently against the center of Bonnie's forehead.

A faint shiver passed through Bonnie's body.

"What is that?" I asked.

Willow glanced at me.

There was faint amusement in her expression, as though she'd expected the question.

"A spiritual compound," Her thumb remained against Bonnie's skin. "It allows me to follow whatever trail was left behind during the attack."

The amusement disappeared from her voice.

"If there is anything to find, I should be able to find it."

My attention sharpened.

"Anything?"

"Who touched her. What kind of magic was used. How it entered her."

She paused.

"And, if we're fortunate, who sent it."

The room seemed to grow quieter.

I looked at Bonnie.

Then back at Willow.

"So it's magic," I said, unnecessarily, if only to break the silence gathering around us.

"That is what I am here to find out. But I believe so... Yes."

Willow's thumb remained against Bonnie's forehead.

"And it's clearly astral in nature. An attack conducted through the dreaming rather than the waking world. Whoever did this knew exactly what they were doing."

My gaze moved between Willow and Bonnie once again.

"Who do you think is stronger?" I asked.

My question caused her to give me a sharp look, but for me, that was a necessary question. So I continued to ask.

"You or whoever did this?"

Willow laughed softly. There was enough confidence in the sound that it should have reassured me. Instead, it made me more uneasy.

"You clearly don't know much about us Shelters, Your Majesty. We're a prominent bloodline. If this were the work of a Blossom witch, I might expect some genuine resistance." Her mouth curved. "But anyone else? I doubt very much they'd give me trouble."

She closed her eyes and then sighed. "I intend to trace this back to its source. If you'd like, once I've confirmed who's responsible, I can return the favor." Her fingers tightened slightly against the dish. "You know. Harm them in kind."

"Do it."

Her eyes opened in surprise.

I doubled down anyway. "Kill them, once you're certain."

Chapter 69: A witch's price

LYSANDER

For the first time since she'd entered the room, Willow looked genuinely surprised.

"You don't hold back."

"They tried to kill her." I looked at Bonnie. "I see no reason for restraint."

Willow studied me for another moment before giving a small nod. "Noted."

She closed her eyes again. Then she began to chant.

The words were low at first, barely more than a murmur, but there was something unsettling about the language. I didn't recognize a single syllable. It sounded older than anything I'd encountered in my uncle's libraries, older even than some of the oldest spells I'd heard discussed by the witches I myself had encountered.

The air changed.

I felt it before I could identify what was happening.

Pressure gathered against my ears. If I could describe it as anything, I would liken it to the strange heaviness that came before a storm broke.

The orange heat inside the lamps along the walls flickered simultaneously, dimming and brightening in an uneven rhythm despite the complete absence of bad weather.

Willow's voice changed. It layered over itself. One voice became two, both speaking through the same mouth at slightly different speeds, creating an echo that didn't quite sound like an echo.

"Like I suspected. It was a dream attack," she murmured, and her brow tightened. "They must be a talented dreamwalker. That's not an easy discipline to master."

The pressure in the room increased.

"This feels like an old bloodline."

She drew a slow breath.

"Practiced."

Then she went quiet.

Her head tilted slightly, as though she were listening to something very far away.

"I don't want to jump to conclusions." Another pause followed before she broke the terse silence again. "But this has Blossom family written all over it."

The healer and I exchanged a glance.

I couldn't explain the reaction that went through me at the name.

I only knew that something cold had settled low in my stomach.

Blossom? I had heard the name before. Of course I had. But hearing it spoken in that room, with Bonnie lying unconscious beside us and the remnants of the attack still clinging to her, made it feel different.

More immediate. More dangerous. Why would the Blossoms be involved in this again? I thought the fixation on healers of legends from their end ended with Valentine. Was someone else other than the dead supreme also obsessed with healers too? Or was this just assumptions? From the way she was speaking, it was clear there was some beef between both families. But never say never. I filed that somewhere.

"I have their signature now," Willow whispered as her fingers twitched in response. "I will now be locking in."

A small satisfied smile appeared on her face as she said it, and for one brief moment, the tension in the room eased.

I let myself breathe up until Willow spoke again.

"It's a man."

I stepped closer.

"Who?"

"Well... I am still acclimating. But he seemed to be bathing." Her brow furrowed. "I am not entirely sure, but it feels and looks like he is in a jacuzzi."

She sounded almost confused. "It's dark too, and everything feels warm."

"Who is he?" I demanded as I moved another step toward her. "Are they actually Blossom?"

"I'm trying to keep my presence minimal."

The confidence had disappeared from her voice. Strain had replaced it. Her words came thinner now, stretched by effort.

"I hope it works."

The second those words left her lips, her body immediately trembled.

At first, I assumed it was the exertion, then the trembling intensified.

Willow's shoulders jerked violently, and her spine arched.

"What..." I was already moving toward her when her head snapped backward.

Her eyes flew open, and they were completely white. There were no irises, no pupils either.

Literally nothing human remained in them.

Every instinct in me screamed that something had gone horribly wrong.

Then she spoke. The voice that came from her mouth was deep and unmistakably male. Nothing like the woman who had walked into the room minutes earlier.

"This is your fault." She cackled in that manly voice.

Every hair along my arms rose in response.

"Who are you?" I demanded, my voice came out rougher than I'd intended.

The thing wearing Willow's face now and voice too smiled.

It was too wide and sickeningly still.

"I am the fall of this house."

Then she screamed, as if taking power over what she lost in seconds. Her will. The sound ripped through the infirmary wing.

Doors slammed open somewhere beyond the room. Footsteps thundered down the corridor as people rushed toward the noise, but I barely registered any of it.

Willow collapsed.

Her body hit the floor hard, and she immediately began convulsing.

Her heels hammered against the tile.

"What the fuck?"

I dropped to my knees beside her.

"Your Majesty, Don't touch her!" The healer seized my arm and yanked me backward with surprising strength.

I resisted instinctively. "Then what the fuck do I do?"

My heart was pounding so hard I could feel it in my throat. Every instinct I possessed was screaming at me to act, to stop whatever was happening, to do something other than kneel there and watch.

The healer looked terrified.

"She knew the risks." Her voice had gone thin even as she said those cruel words. "This is part of the job. Astral work always carries a cost if the trail leads somewhere strong enough to fight back."

I stared at Willow.

Her convulsions began to slow.

One jerk at first. Then another. Before it slowly settled into nothing.

Her body went completely still.

For a moment, no one moved.

The silence that followed was somehow worse than the screaming.

I stared at the woman lying motionless on the floor, unable to tell whether she was unconscious, dead, or somewhere else entirely.

For one long, suspended moment, nothing moved.

The room seemed to hold its breath with us. The lamps had stopped flickering, the strange pressure that had gathered around Willow was gone, and even the healers in the corridor beyond the door had fallen silent after whatever had just happened.

Then Willow's eyes opened again.

They were blue this time. Human-looking almost. But they looked nothing like they had when she'd first entered the room. The confidence was gone from them, along with the faint amusement she'd carried whenever she spoke about the Shelters or her abilities. What remained was a terrible, hollow exhaustion, the kind that seemed to have settled somewhere deeper than her body.

She pushed herself upright slowly, one trembling hand braced against the floor.

I moved toward her before the healer could stop me again.

"Are you all right?"

Willow didn't answer.

Instead, she stared down at the hand supporting her weight.

She turned it over slowly, studying her palm as though it belonged to someone else. Her fingers curled inward, then opened again. She flexed them once, twice, waiting for something I couldn't see.

Whatever she expected never came.

A faint crease appeared between her brows.

Then something changed in her expression.

Fear.

Not the startled kind that came from waking after a seizure, but something deeper and more immediate, the expression of someone who had reached for something familiar and discovered that it simply wasn't there anymore.

"I can't feel it," she whispered.

I crouched beside her. "Feel what?"

Her fingers trembled. She lifted her eyes to mine.

For a moment, she simply stared at me, and I could see her trying to decide whether she had misunderstood what was happening. The healer had already moved closer, watching Willow with the same concern that had settled across my own face.

"My magic," Willow finally said. Her voice was so quiet that I almost missed it. "It's gone."

The words didn't make sense.

I stared at her.

"That isn't possible."

It came out before I could stop myself.

Willow looked down at her hand again.

"I can't feel it."

There was a strange helplessness in her voice now, one I hadn't felt from her even when her body had been convulsing violently enough to shake the floor beneath her.

"I can't reach for it. I can't sense it. It's just..." She swallowed. "Nothing."

The healer immediately knelt beside her.

"Willow, look at me."

Willow did, but her attention seemed to be slipping away from us already. Her pupils shifted unfocused across the room, and her breathing changed, becoming slower and shallower.

"Stay with me," the healer said.

Willow blinked. Once. Twice. Then her eyes rolled back.

Her body went completely limp.

I caught her before she could fall against the floor, lowering her carefully while the healer moved in beside me.

"Willow."

There was no response.

The healer pressed two fingers against her throat, then leaned closer to listen to her breathing.

"She's unconscious."

I looked at her.

"Is she alive?"

"Yes."

The answer came quickly, but there was no reassurance in it.

The healer checked Willow's pulse again, her expression tightening as though she were searching for something that refused to reveal itself.

"Her vitals are stable."

"What the fuck happened to her?"

"I don't know."

That answer bothered me more than anything else she'd said.

Healers were supposed to know.

Witches were supposed to know.

Someone in this room was supposed to understand what had just happened.

Instead, we were all staring at Willow as she, like many other things, became another mystery.

I looked toward Bonnie's bed.

She remained unconscious, exactly as she'd been before Willow arrived. Her breathing was still shallow but steady, her face pale beneath the soft light of the infirmary.

Only minutes ago, I had thought the worst thing that could happen tonight was failing to identify whoever had attacked her.

Now I wasn't sure what I was looking at.

Willow had entered this room confident that she could follow the magical trail back to its source. She had called herself part of a prominent bloodline. She had spoken about Blossom witches as though they were the only people who might actually challenge her.

Then she'd found something.

Something had found her back.

And whatever had happened during that connection had stripped her of the very thing that made her powerful.

Her magic.

I looked at Willow again.

The words she'd spoken before collapsing returned to me with uncomfortable clarity.

This is your fault.

That voice had not belonged to her. The second thing they said was even worse. What they referred to themselves as.

The fall of this house.

A faint sound interrupted the thought.

I froze.

For a second, I wasn't sure I'd actually heard it.

But then I heard it again, and it sounded suspiciously like a cough. It felt as though it was coming from Bonnie.

The mere idea of that caused my head to snap toward her.

Her body shifted beneath the blankets, her brow tightening as though waking itself hurt. She coughed again, weaker this time, and dragged in a shallow breath.

"Bonnie?"

Her eyelids fluttered.

I was already leaning over her before I realized I'd moved.

"Bonnie, look at me."

Her eyes opened slowly.

They were unfocused at first, glassy with exhaustion, but they were open.

She was awake.

And for the first time since this hellish night had begun, I felt something inside my chest loosen.

"Bonnie."

Her gaze shifted toward me.

Then she coughed again, and I tightened my hold on her hand.

"I'm here."

Her eyes finally settled on mine.

And I forgot, for one precious moment, about everything else.

To heal a Rogue

BONNIE

The cough dragged something loose in my chest, something that had been sitting there since before I opened my eyes, and I stared down at my own hands while it worked its way out of me. Half of me expected to find blood again. There wasn't any. Just my palms, pale and trembling slightly in the low light, and I turned them over like they might tell me something my own memory couldn't.

Had any of it actually happened? The beast who had taken my mother's voice and cadence to drown me. The pinch that left a real mark on real skin. The strange dream meadow. The bound man with green eyes I'd already seen once before, in several different shapes, snarling over me with claws. His mother's voice, flat and merciless, cursing him in front of an audience of shifting, faceless women.

What had she said?

I curse *****, first of my womb and my greatest pain.

It was so vivid in my mind. How he'd screamed that he'd done it all for her. For her love.

None of it made sense laid out against a plain infirmary ceiling. I couldn't tell if the goddess had been trying to hand me something, some warning wrapped in old grief, or if my own mind had come apart under enough pressure that it started manufacturing horrors to fill in the cracks.

I looked around the room properly this time. Stone walls. A lamp burning bright near the door. It felt real. But I still wasn't entirely convinced.

My eyes found Lysander, and for one unfair, ugly second, my whole body braced itself, waiting for his face to blur and shift the way every face in every dream had shifted lately. I was expecting the worst. I was waiting for his hands to close around my throat instead of reach for me.

Then he pulled me into his arms.

I didn't relax right away. I couldn't make myself. But there was something about the specific weight of it, the exact pressure of his palm flat between my shoulder blades, like he was trying to hold me together rather than pin me somewhere I couldn't escape, that told my body the truth before my mind caught up. This was him. Actually him. My arms came up slowly and wrapped around his back, fisting into the fabric of his shirt.

"I was so afraid," I tried to be brave with my voice, but it shuddered, and my voice came out smaller than I wanted it to, thinner than I would have allowed if I'd had any warning this was coming.

"It's fine now," he assured me.

It wasn't, not really. But I let myself believe it anyway, for the length of one breath.

Over his shoulder, movement caught my eye. Someone was being lifted off the floor and settled onto a stretcher. They were limp, with their head lolling to one side.

"Who's that?" I asked.

He turned, followed my gaze, and something in his jaw tightened before he answered.
"Don't worry about her."

"Why not?"

Something rolled off him through the bond before he'd even finished the sentence. It was guilt, and goddess was it thick and heavy, with worry stacked on top of it like sediment settling in still water.

"What happened?" I said, pushing myself up slightly against the pillows. "Please tell me."

He sighed and glanced toward the girl being wheeled out through the far doors, and I watched his shoulders drop under some weight he clearly hadn't decided how to carry yet.

"We wanted to figure out who did this to you," he said. "So I brought in a witch. But whatever attacked you was stronger than her. I think... I think it took her magic."

I sucked in a breath sharp enough to hurt. "Goddess... I... I think I can fix her," I said as I tried to sit all the way up, and his hand came down gently against my shoulder, holding

me in place without any real force behind it, just enough insistence that I felt the weight of his intent.

"You need to rest," he said. "Your hands and your stomach haven't even healed yet."

I looked down at my own hands. He was right. They were still open and still raw beneath the salve someone had smoothed over them while I had been unconscious.

I reached for the hum anyway, that familiar pull low in my chest, and waited for the blue glow to answer. It flickered once, weak and uncertain, and then it died before it reached my palms.

"Seeing that," he said, quiet, "I have to assume you're not exactly in shape to help anyone else right now. If there is even a chance that you can help her, it can wait until you are all better. Help yourself first, Bonnie. Just get better. For now."

I wanted to argue. Every instinct in me wanted to push back, to insist I could manage it if I just tried hard enough, but something in the way he said it, steady and immovable, told me he wasn't going to accept any other answer tonight. I let it go, though it cost me something.

He fully sat down beside the bed when he realized I was not going to fight him. "What happened?"

"I'm not entirely sure," I admitted. "All I can really say is that some creature attacked me. I do not know if I can call it a creature. It was definitely a man."

He nodded at that, even if it was clear he did not fully understand.

"Your dreams are literally bleeding into reality," he added, dragging a hand down his face. "I thought you were having a—" He stopped himself and cleared his throat instead. "I thought it was an ordinary sex dream. Before you started bleeding from three different places." He let out a breath. "Delta also told me this wasn't the first time. That your dreams have done this before, she said you once choked water straight out of your lungs."

Heat rushed up my neck at the mention of the sex dream. Had he been awake? I quickly pushed the embarrassment away, though. We were having a very important conversation. "Yeah." I pulled the blanket tighter around myself. "He took the shape of my mother that time. Tried to drown me in a bathtub that felt exactly like the one from my childhood."

"Fuck! I need to know exactly who this bastard is!" Lysander said, something dark cutting through his voice now. "Did you see his face?"

"I'm not sure. He shifts. But it's a man, and he's strong. Stronger than anything I've felt in a dream before because he is so real there." I hesitated. "He's trying to kill me because I keep getting in the way of something. He's trying to reach someone, and every time I show up, it interrupts whatever he's attempting. He got angry enough at me interrupting him that he decided killing me was worth the trouble."

I looked at his face, at how lost he seemed trying to follow the shape of it, and something in me softened despite myself.

"It doesn't fully make sense to me either," I said. "But that's the closest thing to his motivation I've got." I let out a slow breath. "This time, though, he had every chance to finish it. To kill me. Hell... He'd nearly succeeded, honestly. And then he didn't. He let me go, and then I got pulled somewhere else instead into what felt like a memory. His memory, I believe. Except the timeline doesn't add up at all. Whoever he actually is, he'd have to be old. Impossibly old."

"And also," I said, "The monster that did this to me, he felt like—"

"Like what?" Lysander pushed.

"Like me," I said, quieter now. "I don't know why. But I think he might be a healer too."