

To heal a Rogue

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To heal a Rogue

BONNIE

"You are nothing like whatever did that to you," Lysander said, sharp enough that I flinched slightly.

"I'll call someone more experienced with this," he continued, gentler now, reaching for my hand. "I think she can actually help you, and settle my own nerves in the process. But until then, you have to stay awake. No matter what happens, you cannot fall asleep until we're certain it's safe."

I nodded.

"Who is this experienced person, by the way?" I asked.

"I mentioned her before. Fia."

I nodded again, and he reached out, brushing a strand of hair back from my face, his fingers lingering there a beat longer than they strictly needed to.

"You scared me so badly," he said.

My face went hot all over again, and our eyes caught and held there, and for one strange, suspended second the whole room narrowed down to just the small space between us. I felt myself lean in without deciding to. He leaned in too, close enough that I could feel the warmth coming off him.

Then a knock at the door broke it apart before either of us finished the motion.

Lysander cleared his throat, straightening. "Who is it?"

The door opened, and the healer stepped through. "The witch has stabilized. We believe she'll recover. We were going to notify her family about what happened to her."

"No," Lysander said. "Not yet. Bonnie here believes she can help her. So hold out as long as you're able. My reign as regent has already been controversial enough without another disaster attached to it."

The healer nodded, then hesitated in the doorway. "There's one more thing."

"What is it?"

"Luna Amaranthine is here. She'd like to see you both."

I had no idea who that was, but Lysander clearly did, given that his whole expression shifted into something guarded and tight.

"Why would she want to see us?" he demanded. "Why is she even here?"

"I'm not certain," the healer said. "It seems she stayed the night."

"Well... she's betrothed to Prince Johann," Lysander said, mostly to himself, working through it. "So I suppose that isn't entirely surprising. Perhaps she's simply being kind."

"I agree." The healer added.

Only for Lysander to shake his head in response.

"To be frank, I doubt it," he added, before the healer could offer anything further.

She nodded, unbothered by the correction. "Should I let her in?"

He glanced at me, then back toward the healer. "I don't trust Johann's fiancée. I'll meet her myself."

He turned back to me. "Please try not to sleep. Delta will be with you shortly."

Then he was gone, following the healer out, the door swinging shut behind them, and I was left staring at my own hands again in the sudden quiet.

I reached for the hum a second time. This time, it answered, though it was slower than usual. It felt reluctant to show up, but what mattered was that it came.

I watched as the source spread its soft blue light across my palm, and the cuts along my hand began knitting shut beneath the glow. I moved to my other hand next, then pressed both against the wound at my stomach, wincing as skin pulled itself back together.

My mind kept circling back to that meadow. The woman with no complete face and the mention of a curse. Perhaps that was worth mentioning to Lysander. I would mention it once he was back.

I stood, testing my legs. It was steadier than I expected, and with that in the bag, I made my way toward the door.

I was worried about the witch. I couldn't just lie here doing nothing while someone suffered because of shit that happened to me. I did not feel like dragging more people into some bout of fresh hell.

The infirmary beyond it was louder than I expected, with healers moving fast between beds, low, urgent conversations passing back and forth in overlapping streams. My little private room had felt like a sanctuary compared to this. Someone spotted me almost immediately and hurried over.

"Oh... You should be resting," the girl said, her hands hovering like she wanted to steer me back toward my room without quite daring to touch me.

She was an Omega like me. That much was clear.

Still, the kindness in her voice felt strange. Foreign. Something I hadn't earned and didn't fully trust yet. But I let it pass without comment.

It felt like the kind of thing that would be more prominent now that I had revealed myself and anyone with eyes would see how fixated Lysander seemed to be with me.

"Where's the witch?" I asked. "The one they brought in tonight?"

"Why?"

"I want to fix her. Obviously. Lysander also approved."

She hesitated, glancing back over her shoulder toward the ward.

"Oh... I do not know about that. That isn't what the head healer said we should—"

"Are you implying I'm lying?" I said, sharper than I intended, though I didn't take it back once it was out.

"No," she said quickly, backing off. "Of course not. I apologize."

"If that is the case, tell me where she is."

"Of course. This way."

She led me through the ward, weaving between beds, and I found the poor witch lying pale and motionless on a narrow cot, her skin drained of nearly all its color.

My stomach twisted at the sight of her.

I called the hum again, and it rose more easily this time, steadier.

When I did that, I noticed the other healers and Omega attendants pausing in their work to watch, murmuring among themselves as I approached. I ignored them and focused entirely on the witch below me, pressing my glowing palms against her arm, as I began to feel the pull as the source flowed out of me and into her.

Then out of nowhere, a vision hit without warning.

I was inside it.

My hands were raised in front of me, fingers spread, and somewhere beyond them the witch was being lifted from the ground. Her feet hung uselessly beneath her, her body jerked upward as though something had seized her around the throat and was pulling her higher.

There was nothing there.

No hand. No rope. Nothing I could see.

But I could feel it.

I could feel the pressure of my own grip around her throat, the invisible force closing tighter with every second. My fingers curled slowly into my palms, and as they did, her body rose higher. She clawed at her neck, her mouth opening as she fought for air, but I didn't loosen my hold.

I tightened it.

The pressure in my hands was so real that my fingers began to ache.

Then I heard myself scream.

"Die, you monster!"

The words tore out of my mouth with a fury that didn't feel like mine, and my hands clenched.

Something inside me surged forward.

The invisible grip around her throat tightened violently, and I felt the resistance give way beneath it. Her head was ripped sideways with enough force to make my stomach turn, and then I tore into her completely.

Everything went red.

The witch, the room, my hands, everything disappeared beneath that thick wash of crimson. I couldn't see anything anymore, but I could still feel the force of what I was doing, the terrible pressure in my hands as though I were still holding her there.

Then it vanished.

The vision snapped away so abruptly that I was left gasping, the memory of my fingers still curled as though they had never stopped gripping her throat.

I staggered back, my vision clearing in uneven pieces.

The girl who'd led me here caught my arm before I could fall.

"Are you alright?" She asked.

I looked down at the witch, my heart still hammering from whatever I'd just been shown, still trying to understand why my own hands had turned violent.

I did not even get to linger on much as the witch's eyes opened.

She sat up slowly, staring down at her own hand, and turning it over like there was something wrong with it.

My body was tense. Part of it was because of what I had just seen. Was it a vision? Was that what I just saw? Or was it a trick of the mind?

I looked back at the witch and saw that her face, this time, broke open into something close to disbelief.

"My... My... magic," she said. "I can feel it again."

To heal a Rogue

LYSANDER

Amaranthine waited in the corridor, and my first, rather uncharitable thought was that she looked far too immaculate for this hour. She wore a full gown, her hair sculpted into

an intricate style that must have cost a Luna's Omega an hour of careful work, and her jewelry shimmered in the dim light at her throat and wrists. Every detail of her appearance seemed calculated, purposeful, as if she had dressed for a grand stage instead of a hospital hallway at three in the morning.

"It's late," I said. "Is there a reason you wanted to see me?"

A flicker of hurt crossed her face, though I doubted its sincerity, and she revealed a covered dish from behind her back, presenting it to me with both hands as if it were a peace offering.

"I asked the kitchens to prepare this for her," she said. "For... I hear her name is Bonnie. I know it's a small thing, but I wanted to do something." Her voice dropped, softer now, almost mournful. "It's horrible, everything that's been happening tonight. I was there in that hall, you know. I watched you nearly die in front of everyone. I still can't stop thinking about it, if I'm honest. And now, on top of everything, enemies of the throne are trying to finish what they started with your new weapon."

I winced at the word before I could stop myself. "She isn't a weapon."

Amaranthine's eyes widened slightly, and she nodded fast, contrite. "You're right. That was careless of me. Language matters more than I gave it credit for just now."

I reached for the dish, but she held on a moment longer, so we stood suspended in a strange, lingering pause, our fingers brushing along the rim in a silent standoff.

"I could come in," she said. "Feed her myself, if you'd like. Sit with her a while. Girls need girl time. I am sure with all the shitstorm happening. She will need it even more."

"That's kind of you," I said, easing the dish fully from her grip, "but unnecessary. The staff here can manage, and I intend to stay with her myself."

She let it go easily enough, with no resistance at all. "Of course. I only meant to offer."

As she withdrew, her hand lingered on mine, warm and intentional, her thumb gliding briefly over my knuckles. She glanced up through her lashes, the tilt of her head carrying a practiced grace, rehearsed in a way I couldn't quite pinpoint.

"Well," I said, gently extracting my hand. "Thank you for this." I studied her a moment, something about the whole visit still not sitting right with me. "What does Johann think about you being here, at this hour, alone?"

Something soured briefly behind her eyes. "He doesn't control me. I'm free to do as I please."

"He is your fiancé," I said carefully. "You're aware of exactly how he feels about me currently. I'd hate for there to be more drama stirred up if he learned you'd come here like this, unannounced, this late. Being nice to his enemies."

"I'm not worried about Johann," she said, a little too quickly.

"If you're worried about bad blood between him and me," I continued, "you don't need to be. He has every right to feel angry, considering everything that happened with the will. If our positions were reversed, I imagine I'd feel exactly the same." I softened my tone. "I understand, as his future bride, you might be concerned about what happens once I'm formally crowned. I want you to know I have no intention of retaliating against him. Not unless he's carrying sins heavy enough to warrant it." I let that hang a moment, watching her face carefully. "All I can offer you, honestly, is this. Watch closely who you choose to marry."

She let out a small, nervous laugh, one hand coming up to touch the pendant at her throat. "Johann's fiancée? Future wife?" Something close to pity crossed her expression then, quick and strange. "I see you don't know yet."

"Know what?"

"Tomorrow is a brand new day," she said, sidestepping the question so smoothly it took me a second to notice she'd done it at all. "You've already had more than enough for one night. I'll see you in the morning, Your Majesty. Then we can have a very important talk."

She bowed, slow and lingering, the gesture stretching well beyond what courtesy demanded, her gaze locked on mine as she straightened. The whole exchange left a heavy, nameless discomfort in my chest, one I had no desire to probe. She turned away, her heels striking a measured, echoing rhythm on the stone until the sound vanished around the corner.

I turned to the head healer, who'd been standing quietly by the door through the entire exchange, her expression carefully blank.

"Am I losing my mind," I said, "or was that entire interaction genuinely strange?"

"She was likely just trying to be kind, Your Majesty," the healer offered, though there was something diplomatic in the way she said it, like she was choosing her words as carefully as I'd choose mine.

"You don't need to be diplomatic with me right now," I said. "We both just watched that happen."

I glanced down at the dish still balanced in my hands, noticing for the first time the delicate embroidery on the fabric covering it, a detail I had ignored until now.

"This has my cousin's handwriting all over it, somehow," I said. "I don't know how yet. But it does."

I held the dish out to her. "Toss it."

She hesitated, glancing between me and the covered plate. "Your Majesty, wouldn't that seem needlessly cruel, given the gesture behind it?"

"I genuinely do not give a damn. It's probably poisoned for all I know," I said.

Her expression shifted immediately, and she took it from me without further argument, holding it now as if it might bite her. "As you wish. I'll see to it."

She disappeared down the corridor, and I pulled out my phone, thumb hovering over Fia's contact for a moment before I typed the message out properly.

Can you come by, if you have the time? Bonnie needs you more than ever right now.

I sent the message and slipped my phone away, my mind looping back to everything Bonnie had told me. The man in her dreams, ever-changing, impossibly ancient by any reckoning, powerful enough to steal a Shelter witch's magic in a heartbeat. No matter how I tried to steer my thoughts elsewhere, they kept catching on the same troubling point, again and again.

That tube, buried beneath the estate. The floating, hairless figure suspended in murky green water. The cursed demigod Lycaon.

It defied logic. Bradley had assured me the man was still deeply unconscious, sealed beneath fifteen generations of witchcraft meant to keep him that way. Yet the feeling clung to me, an instinctive certainty coiled low in my gut that the two were linked, no matter how impossible it looked on paper.

But I would not linger on it. Fia would know. If anyone in this entire kingdom could glimpse the shape of something the rest of us were missing, it would be her.

She could glimpse into the future after all.

I kept turning it all over, standing alone in the corridor, my thoughts knotted between Amaranthine's unsettling visit and the figure suspended in that tank. Then I heard it: the crisp, measured click of heels on stone, drawing nearer, followed by a low, familiar chuckle that sent a chill racing up my arms before I could even place its source.

I turned.

At the far end of the corridor stood Queen Edelina, dressed head to toe in black, her expression unreadable in the low light, watching me with the patient, unhurried air of someone who'd been expecting to find me exactly here.

"Bradley told me I would find you here," she said.

When the heck did she return?

Chapter 73: Battle lines 1

EDELINA

I'd gone shopping first, telling myself it was strategy rather than vanity, though the truth sat somewhere between the two. Now I wore a black dress, fitted neatly through the waist, and red heels sharp enough to draw blood if I happened to step on someone the right way. I needed to feel like myself again after everything the infirmary had stripped from me, needle by needle, day by day and week by miserable week.

I'd considered a hotel first, somewhere quiet where I could plan my next several moves without prying eyes or inconvenient questions. Then, halfway through the drive, I looked at the back of my driver's head and changed my mind.

"You know what. I am no longer going to the hotel.. You will take me somewhere else instead," I said.

"Where would that be?" He demanded.

"Wraithmoor Close." I replied.

"That'll cost considerably more, ma'am."

"It is no problem. I can pay."

He drove without further argument, and I settled back into the seat, spending most of the journey rehearsing everything I intended to say. I ran through every possible version of the conversation waiting for me, considering which questions might be asked and how I would answer them without giving away more than necessary.

Going back to the castle grounds tonight and so soon after what I'd helped to do to that wretched spy, struck me as the smarter move. Bradley would never suspect a woman bold enough to return home the same night she'd allegedly been at a club for some shady business. If anything, my return would make whatever the spy would have shared seem less useful to work with. I even allowed myself a short nap in the back of the car, closing my eyes only after I'd exhausted every possible scenario.

I woke to the sound of the driver's voice.

"We've reached there, ma'am."

I blinked myself awake and looked out through the window.

He was right. We had now reached the boundary where the human roads simply stopped making sense to anyone who wasn't born to this world.

He wouldn't know that though.

After this, the familiar human roads would disappear somewhere behind us, powered by some powerful magic and be replaced by the strange, shifting landscape that marked the

edge of our world. Beyond this point, the roads simply stopped making sense to anyone who wasn't born to it.

I handed my card forward. The driver swiped it, returned it without comment, and I stepped out. I watched the car disappear down the road before turning toward the path ahead.

The route that followed was one no human eye could ever hold onto, no matter how long they wandered through it or how desperately they tried. The landscape seemed to resist being remembered to them, twisting just enough to make itself impossible to follow. I'd never had that problem. I knew the way as instinctively as I knew the curves of my own body.

I walked until I reached the first checkpoint.

It was there red dots bloomed across my chest and shoulders almost instantly.

I stopped.

A voice barked from somewhere in the darkness, sharp and authoritative, demanding that I identify myself.

I raised both hands slowly, keeping my movements deliberate.

"I am Edelina. Your queen."

A flashlight swung up into my face. For a moment, the beam blinded me, and then the red dots vanished as quickly as they'd appeared.

One of the sentinels rushed forward and dropped into a bow.

"Our apologies, Your Majesty."

"It's simply what you're trained to do," I said, lowering my hands. "I hold no ill will."

The sentinel remained bowed as I passed, and I continued toward the grounds without looking back.

A car appeared moments later, and another sentinel offered to drive me the rest of the way himself. I climbed in without another word, and he took the wheel, guiding us slowly toward the main estate grounds.

I wondered, watching the buildings grow larger through the windshield, how long it would take before Bradley caught wind of my return. I gave it good odds that he'd be the very first face I saw upon arrival.

I was right, of course.

He stood waiting the moment I stepped out of the car, bowing low as he approached.

"This is such a surprise," he said.

"Is it?" I said. "That infirmary was a hellhole, Bradley. I started missing home terribly. I don't know if you kept tabs on me while I was there, but I imagine those sweet healers are worried sick that their patient simply walked out on them tonight. I did use my title to force the issue."

He smiled at that. That told me he knew already.

"Do call them," I continued. "Clear the air, so no one worries unnecessarily."

"Of course." He said as he studied my face. "I'm sorry for your loss, by the way, Your Majesty."

"Oh... Thank you. I wanted to be there by the way. My health simply wouldn't allow it. One of the reasons Conny sent me to that place in the first place was to keep my condition quiet. If I had shown up earlier, it would have been a whole thing."

Something flickered across his expression, brief and calculating.

"What?" I coughed out like I didn't know what I was pushing at. "Did he tell you something different?"

"No," he quickly fixed his face. "His Majesty, goddess rest his soul, told me nothing at all on the matter."

We continued inside, passing servants who froze mid-step at the sight of me before dropping into hurried bows.

"You should know a great deal has changed since you were last here," Bradley said.

"I've heard," I said. "A little birdie told me that Lysander is regent now. His own mother, if she were still alive, would be proud."

"I imagine this feels insulting to you," Bradley began.

"It doesn't feel insulting," I said, cutting him off cleanly. "It is insulting. I'm certain the whole estate is busy inventing reasons why my husband decided against letting our son inherit what belongs to him."

"From what I understand," Bradley said, careful now, "His Majesty simply didn't believe the prince was fit to rule."

I stopped walking and turned to face him directly.

"We both know that's a load of nonsense."

"Perhaps," he said. "But it's kinder than the alternative explanation."

He paused there, and I watched him choose his next words with visible caution.

"I won't let cruel words leave my mouth on the matter," he said.

"What words?" I pushed.

"You'd know better than I would." He held my gaze. "Do you believe Prince Johann deserves that seat, given the blood running through his veins?"

Chapter 74: Battle lines 2

EDELINA

"The throne belongs to the De'Lunes. Only a true De'Lune should sit on it. Alpha Lysander carries that blood. Prince Johann, from what I understand, does not."

I laughed, sharp and genuine enough that it startled him slightly.

"You actually believe that?"

"Why would my Alpha lie to me?"

"I don't know what game Cornelius was playing at the end," I said. "But my son is his blood, and a De'Lune by every right that matters. If that's truly the reason this seat skipped him, know now that I will fight the fact that a distant relative is taking what belongs to him by birth."

He smiled, unbothered. "Even if it requires a blood test to settle?"

"Do the test tomorrow," I said. "I want this resolved immediately."

That caught him off guard. "Very well. I'll arrange it."

"It's late regardless," he added.

"I'm not particularly interested in sleep tonight," I said. "Where is the soon to be Alpha King? I'd like to greet him."

"The infirmary."

I laughed again. "What happened? Nerves getting the better of him?"

"No," Bradley said. "We had a magical attack. It seems there are people determined to see him fail before he's even crowned. Vile, honestly, how far some will go to humiliate the power this house is meant to hold, all for their own petty agendas."

I felt the accusation buried just beneath his words, subtle as it was, and smiled through it anyway.

"I agree," I said. "It is vile. Thank you by the way, Bradley. I'll see you in the morning."

I walked a few steps further before stopping, turning back to find him still standing exactly where I'd left him.

"I do mean the DNA test thing," I said. "I have nothing to hide where my son is concerned."

"Good," he said.

I continued on, letting my breathing settle slowly with each step, and made my way toward the infirmary. I was mildly surprised to find Lysander standing just outside it, alone in the corridor.

I let my heels click a little louder against the stone so he'd hear me coming, and he looked up, clearly caught off guard at the sight of me.

"Bradley told me I would find you here," I said.

He composed himself quickly. "Queen Edelina. This is a surprise."

"I'm certain it is." I studied him, this boy who'd somehow inherited everything my own son had been promised his entire life. "So you're the one Conny decided to hand the throne to. Do you know why?"

"I don't particularly want to fight with you tonight is that is why you are here."

"Tough luck," I said. "What sort of mother would I be if I didn't defend my son's honor? That seat should be his. Whichever elders approved this mess clearly want to watch this family tear itself apart in some grand, entertaining war. You should have been wise enough to see that coming and refuse the throne when it was offered."

His eyes went strangely distant for a moment. "I accepted because I saw reason in it. And I'm certain you already know exactly why your son isn't sitting where he expected to be."

I smiled at that, sharp and thin. "I've heard baseless rumors floating around that my Johann is a bastard."

"Isn't he?"

I felt the urge to slap him rise fast and hot, and I swallowed it down just as quickly. He was nearly untouchable now, powerful in ways that would make such a gesture catastrophically foolish.

"No," I said. "He is not. I've asked Bradley to arrange a DNA test himself. I hope he follows through. So my name and my son's name are cleared entirely, and perhaps you'll finally see fit to vacate a seat that was never yours to begin with."

I stepped closer.

"I heard what happened to you yesterday in the evening," I said. "It's something of a miracle you're still standing here at all. You should cherish that."

"Is that a threat?"

"How on earth does that sound like a threat?" I said. "You're blood, Lysander. I wish you no harm."

"Is that so?"

I nodded once. "I also heard we have a healer among us now. That the very girl blamed for my husband's murder is the one who saved your life tonight. What a strange, wonderful world we live in."

"Rogues harmed my uncle," he said, something protective sharpening his tone immediately. "Your husband. Not her. She's innocent. We have one of the culprits in custody now, and I'm confident he'll talk soon enough. I only hope his allies find no peace before that happens."

"As long as my husband receives justice," I said, though inside, something cold and frightened twisted through my chest at the mention of the rogue in custody.

"Well, welcome back," he said. "And goodnight, Queen Edelina. Have the night you deserve."

I smiled, and just as I opened my mouth to reply, the head healer came rushing out through the infirmary doors.

"Your Majesty—" she began, then froze entirely at the sight of me standing beside him.

She bowed deep and fast. "My Queen."

I waved a hand, unbothered. "What did you come to say?"

She glanced back toward Lysander instead. "The girl... Bonnie healed the witch. She's back on her feet now. Her magic has returned as well."

"Really," Lysander said, already moving toward the door.

Curiosity pulled me forward without a second thought. This girl, this Bonnie, has to be the very healer who should have taken the fall for a crime she hadn't committed, at least according to what those dumb rogues has initially planned. I followed them both inside, ignoring the wave of bows rippling out from every servant and healer we passed, my focus was locked entirely on him.

We reached the ward, and I watched him cross toward a girl seated on the edge of a bed with another girl who I recognized as a witch who regularly worked with the royal family.

Platinum white hair spilled loose around her shoulders.

My stomach dropped straight through the floor.

Why did she have white hair? White lashes? And even white brows, pale as frost against her skin?

It reminded me, with a violence that nearly stole the breath from my lungs, of *Lycaon*.

To heal a Rogue

LYSANDER

I crossed the ward faster than I meant to, my irritation outpacing whatever relief I should have felt at seeing her upright and steady on her own feet.

"I told you to rest."

"I'm sorry." She didn't sound particularly sorry. Her chin came up a fraction, the same stubborn tilt I'd already learned to recognize in the short time I'd known her. "But I couldn't just lie there resting, knowing she was suffering because of something meant for me. I had to do something."

I wanted to argue further. I didn't. Arguing with her rarely produced anything but more argument, and I had bigger things pulling at my attention right now than winning a fight I'd already lost the moment she'd walked out of that room on her own two legs.

I turned to Willow instead, who sat upright on her cot now, color returning to her cheeks in patches.

"How do you feel?"

She lifted one hand and snapped her fingers. A small flame bloomed between them, orange and steady, before she let it die out with a satisfied exhale.

"My magic's really back," she said. "Thank you."

"That's good to hear," I said. "It's good to see you conscious at all, honestly. Now, is there anything you can tell us about whoever attacked you? Anything that might help us find him?"

She shook her head slowly, the motion careful, like even that small effort cost her something. "My memory of it is mostly blank. Fragments, nothing whole. But I can tell

you this much. He's frighteningly powerful. Stronger than anything I've encountered before. I don't believe it was a Blossom witch now. My hypothesis was wrong."

Frustration coiled tight and useless in my chest. I nodded anyway, because there wasn't anything else to do with it right now.

"Thank you regardless," I said. "That's still useful information."

The head healer stepped in beside the bed. "We'll want to run a few tests before we release her."

"I have no problem with that," Willow said, already settling back against her pillows.

I turned back to Bonnie. "Well. Since you've apparently taken it upon yourself to fix everything before daybreak, you should head back to your ward."

"I'm fine," she said. "I fixed myself too, you know."

"I know," I said, unable to keep the edge entirely out of my voice. "We'll go back to my mother's room, then. Delta isn't here yet, but she should be there at least."

I reached for her hand, and she let me take it, and we started our journey to go down the corridor together. We nearly collided with Queen Edelina, who was standing behind like she'd been waiting there the entire time.

"Your Majesty," I said, straightening. "I didn't realize you'd followed us in."

She cleared her throat, though her eyes never left Bonnie, sweeping over her slowly, taking in every detail with an intensity that made something protective flare up in my chest.

"I was curious," she said, "what a healer from the age of legend actually looked like, up close. The white hair is certainly striking. Interesting choice, whatever gave you that particular mark."

Bonnie shifted beside me, visibly uncomfortable under the scrutiny, and dipped into a small, formal bow.

"It's a pleasure to see you, Your Majesty."

"I'll tell you plainly, girl," Edelina continued, her voice going cool and precise. "I am not a fan of yours. You killed my husband. Whatever spell you've apparently cast over the rest of this estate, I see straight through it. I know exactly what you are. A killer. A siren, perhaps. Or something worse than either."

"The lack of sleep must be getting to you, Your Majesty," I said, stepping slightly in front of Bonnie before I'd consciously decided to. "We'll be on our way now."

I didn't wait for a response. I moved past her, pulling Bonnie along with me, and didn't look back to see how she took it.

"Sorry about that," I said once we'd put some distance between us and the infirmary doors.

"I think her grief is valid," Bonnie said quietly. "She genuinely believes I did it. That's not nothing."

"I don't think it's grief," I said. "I think it's a much longer game than that. She had a hand in my uncle's death. I know it in my bones, even without proof yet."

Bonnie let out a small, surprised laugh, quiet enough it barely carried. "Shouldn't you at least leave room for doubt?"

"No," I said. "Monsters are easy enough to catch once you know precisely where to look for them."

We walked in silence for a few steps, and then her voice shifted, careful in a way that made me slow down without meaning to.

"Lysander."

"What?"

"There's something I didn't tell you," she said. "Back in the dreamscape. I ended up inside one of his memories. I think it was his memory, at least. He'd been cursed. By his own parent, from what I could tell." She hesitated, her brow furrowing like she was still working through the shape of it herself. "It felt very old. Long ago old. I don't know if that makes any sense."

I stopped walking entirely.

"Do you know his name?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Does it sound familiar," I said, "if I gave you certain names to consider?"

"Not particularly," she said. "Everything about it was fragmented. Blurred at the edges, like trying to remember something from very early childhood."

I let it sit, filing it away carefully rather than pressing further, though my mind had already begun circling back toward that tube beneath the estate, toward the floating, hairless figure suspended in green water that Bradley had called the Lycan King. I didn't want to say the name out loud yet. Not until I had something firmer to attach it to.

"Let's just keep you somewhere safe," I said instead, "and awake, until Fia gets here. She'll be able to make sense of far more of this than either of us can right now."

Bonnie nodded, then glanced sideways at me as we continued walking. "You know a lot about this Fia, don't you."

"I'd say we're fairly close," I said. "She's been a friend for a while now."

"What are her abilities?" she asked. "I can heal, apparently, and now invade dreams too, whether I want to or not. Does she share either of those?"

"Perhaps some overlap," I said. "Mostly, she has visions. Fragments of what's coming, sometimes clear, sometimes not."

"You told me she's the reason you were so certain about us," Bonnie said slowly, working through the logic aloud. "So she must see the future, at least in pieces." She paused, something tightening in her expression. "Because when I touched that witch tonight, healing her, I saw something too. Like a vision of my own. Something I've never experienced before."

I stopped completely in the middle of the corridor, turning to face her fully.

"What did you see?"

"It's strange," she said, her voice dropping lower. "I saw myself killing her. The witch. Not saving her. Killing her, with my own hands, and it felt so real I could barely tell it apart from actually happening."

Something cold settled low in my stomach at that, though I kept my face as steady as I could manage for her sake.

"Don't let that get under your skin," I said. "The future isn't fixed in place, not entirely, not even for someone with your kind of gift. Like I said, let Fia show up. Once the two of you have had a real chance to talk, I'm confident you'll understand far more about what's actually happening to you than either of us can guess at right now."

She nodded slowly, some of the tension easing from her shoulders, though not all of it.

"Thank you," she said.

"It's my job," I said, resuming our walk, keeping her hand firmly in mine. "I'm your mate."

To heal a Rogue

EDELINA

That hair wouldn't leave me alone.

I kept seeing it even after I'd turned away from the girl, that impossible, pale white sitting somewhere behind my eyes like an afterimage burned in by staring too long at the sun. Something about it had settled deep enough in my chest that my whole body had gone tight and strange, and my bladder, apparently, chose that exact moment to join the general mutiny of my nerves.

I found the head healer near the nurses' station, her hands full of charts, her expression carefully composed into the kind of blankness people wear around royalty they don't fully trust.

"Where's the bathroom again?"

She pointed down a short corridor lit by pale, flickering overheads, and I was halfway there when a voice called out behind me from one of the beds.

"Fuck! Me too. I'm full of piss."

I glanced back. The witch, Willow, was already swinging her legs off the mattress, testing her weight on them like she wasn't entirely certain her body still belonged to her after whatever had happened tonight. The head healer nodded permission without much thought, already distracted by something else.

"You can go too."

So the two of us walked there together, side by side, which I hadn't asked for and didn't particularly want. I said nothing about it. There seemed little point in making an issue of shared bladders in front of a woman with a clipboard.

I noticed the girl staring at me somewhere along the short walk. I ignored it at first. People stared at me constantly, for one reason or another, curiosity or fear or simple recognition, and I'd long since stopped granting most of them the satisfaction of a reaction.

I stepped into a stall once we reached the bathroom, latched it, and did my business, my mind still tangled around platinum hair and the particular shape of dread it had left sitting low in my stomach. It was only partway through that I noticed something odd through the gap beneath the door. The girl was there. Her feet were there at least. She was not moving in the slightest or using the bathroom like she had implied. She was simply just standing there, angled directly toward my stall, entirely still, entirely patient in a way that had nothing to do with waiting for a sink or stall to free up.

That was unsettling enough that I called out, my voice sharper than I meant it to be.

"Is there something wrong with you?"

But I got no answer back.

That was worse than an answer would have been.

"Can I help you with something?"

I expected an answer after putting some base in my voice. But sadly, I still got nothing. Then, finally, I saw her turn away and that was followed by the sound of her turning the sink. Soon enough I heard water running hard at the sink, and beneath the rush of it I caught a low mutter, that barely audible.

"Fucking ass weirdo." I retorted, not caring what this was even about.

I finished, wiped, flushed, straightened my dress with more force than the fabric required, and stepped out to find her still at the sink, lathering her hands as slow and unhurried as she could manage. The second I approached the basin beside her, her eyes cut sideways toward me in the mirror, and this time she didn't bother pretending otherwise.

I turned my own tap on, watched the water run clear over my hands, and glanced up to find her staring directly at my reflection, no subtlety left in it whatsoever.

"I find that very uncomfortable," I said. "Or is there something you'd like to share with the class?"

"You're as beautiful as ever, Edelina."

Something in the way she said my name, easy and familiar, without the title that should have preceded it from someone of her specie and rank, set every hair on my arms upright.

"Witch aside," I said, keeping my voice level, "I'm fairly certain you are supposed to know how to address me. With a little more respect."

She laughed. The sound had no business coming from a woman that young. It was too rich and too dark for the throat producing it, and it made something cold crawl slowly up my spine before I'd even understood why.

"You're a bit frightening now."

She turned toward her own reflection, tilting her chin one way and then the other, examining the face staring back at her with the detached curiosity of someone cataloguing flaws in a garment they hadn't chosen themselves.

"I suppose it's this face," she said. "Or maybe it is this body. That's likely why you don't recognize your own husband."

I stopped washing entirely, my hands still frozen under the running water, droplets sliding cold down my wrists.

"What?"

She smiled at me through the mirror, wide and wrong, something moving behind her eyes that had never once belonged to a witch fresh out of an infirmary bed.

"It's me, baby. It's Lycaon."

The name went through me like ice water poured straight down my spine, and for one wild, desperate second I told myself this was theater. Some elaborate trick Lysander had arranged with Bradley's help, meant to shake a confession loose from me before I'd had the chance to properly plan around it

Perhaps they has found out what I was. Perhaps Conny had sang like a canary after all.

"What the fuck is wrong with you," I said, my voice cracking sharper than I intended.

"Edelina." She said, patient now and almost fond, in a way that made my skin crawl worse than open hostility would have. "Drop the act. There are two Lycans standing in this bathroom right now. What exactly do you imagine there is to be afraid of?"

I shuddered hard enough that my hands slipped against the porcelain edge of the sink.

"I'm leaving," I said, already turning toward the door.

It didn't open.

I pulled at the handle again, harder, my fingers scrabbling uselessly against smooth metal that refused to give. Then I felt something press outward from every wall around us instead, a faint shimmer of light stretching itself across the entire room like a membrane sealing us both inside a bubble no one outside would ever notice. I spun back to face her, my heart slamming hard enough now that I could feel it pulsing in my throat.

"What the fuck is this!" I demanded.

"I don't want us disturbed," she said, calm and unbothered, "while we catch up. Edie."

That name.

Nobody had called me that in a very long time. Nobody currently living, at least, and my entire body went rigid at the sound of it, some buried part of myself I'd worked so hard to bury deeper still clawing its way back up through everything I'd built in the years since he'd abandoned me to a throne I never wanted alone.

"Lycaon?" I said, barely above a whisper, my voice failing me in a way it almost never did. "Is it really you?"

He smiled at me through a stranger's mouth, and beneath the borrowed features, beneath the young witch's face that had never once been his own, I saw it clearly now. The exact same smile that had made me a bride once, full of foolish hope, and then a widow in every way that actually mattered, while he still drew breath somewhere far away from the wreckage he'd left behind.

"Of course, baby," he said. "Did you really think something as small as death could keep me from you forever? Not that I died though. It's hard to kill a god. You should know."

Chapter 77: In the middle 1

EDELINA

I stared at her, at him, or at least the borrowed shape of him standing in a body that wasn't his own, wearing another woman's face like a coat stolen off someone else's back.

"Why did you disappear?" I demanded. "Why are you in this body?"

He let out a breath, and even filtered through unfamiliar lungs it carried something of the old weariness I remembered, that particular exhaustion only immortality seemed to produce.

"You know how it went," he said. "I grew disillusioned. Going through the same motions, century after century, watching everyone I ever cared for grow old and die while I stayed exactly the same. I tried living differently for a while. I guess I wanted a quieter life. But that bored me too, eventually, the way everything eventually does when you've had enough centuries to exhaust every version of yourself." He shrugged, an oddly casual gesture in a body built for someone else's shoulders. "So I attempted to take the werewolf throne. By force, since nothing subtler had ever worked."

"I didn't expect the humiliation that followed," he added, something bitter curling at the edge of his voice. "Or the imprisonment. My own mother's had her hand in it too, I am sure. There was no way they could have taken me down that easily. She always did prefer punishment dressed up as protection."

Something in my chest went cold and still, my mind already racing ahead of my mouth.

"We have you," I said.

His eyes sharpened, narrowing on my face with an intensity that made the witch's pretty features look suddenly, briefly monstrous.

"We?" he said. "You're not one of them, Edie. Unless you've defected on the Lycans while I wasn't watching. I am half curious even. Why are you with the werewolves now?"

"When you abandoned us," I said, my voice climbing before I could rein it back in, years of buried resentment finding a crack to pour through, "... When you abandoned all of us, your own people, without so much as a word of explanation, I had to pick myself back up. Alone. I had to give our people something worth living for. Something worth fighting toward, some reason to keep breathing through this endless slow rot of a curse you left us to continue to deal with." My chin lifted despite the tremor working its way up through my ribs. "So I infiltrated the royal werewolf house. It was bold, audacious and reckless, probably, by any sane person's measure. But I did it. I became their Queen, Lycaon. I gave the Alpha King a son even."

I paused, letting that settle between us.

"Once he takes that seat properly," I said, "the curse finally breaks. Everything I've sacrificed will have meant something."

"You really have outdone yourself, Edie."

It felt strange, hearing my own pet name delivered through a stranger's mouth, the cadence of it unmistakably his even wrapped in a voice that had never once belonged to him. Something in my stomach twisted at the wrongness of it, familiar and foreign at once.

"How did you get into this body?" I asked, needing something concrete to hold onto, something to interrogate rather than feel. "I heard there was an attack tonight. The girl whose body you are now apparently in lost her magic entirely. Was that you?"

"Yes," he said, simply, with no apology in it at all. "She went digging for something, looking for whatever she believed she'd find, and left her own body open wide enough for the taking. Easy enough, given how much weakness already ran through her bloodline before I ever touched her." Something flickered across the borrowed face, irritation, maybe, or old resentment surfacing without permission. "My mother did try to fight back. She attempted to put me into stasis. Messing with me the way she always does whenever I get too close to actually escaping her rules and beating her at her own game. She is always interfering, and yet she will have the audacity to claim free will and how she is not allowed to violate certain laws even if she is a goddess."

His mouth curved, something almost fond crossing it now.

"Though I suppose I owe that new little healer some thanks," he said. "Her connection to the goddess is so pure and when she reached for that source, she somehow burned the seal clean off me and let me out of what would have been my second prison."

He stepped closer, and the witch's slender fingers rose to touch my face. It was gentle and careful, in a way I hadn't felt from anyone in longer than I wanted to admit.

I let him.

"I'd call this fate if I believed in it," he said, "Because meeting again like this, my beloved can only be the will of a greater power. And you've been so strong, carrying all of this alone for so long. But that ends now. Let me help you now. It's finally my turn." His eyes searched mine, steady and certain. "Your son. I assume he is part werewolf, part royal blood through his father's line."

I nodded.

That made him smile. "He's the perfect vessel to finally end this curse properly. I'll see him through it. I swear that to you."

I let out a long, shaking breath.

"The issue," I said, "is that my curse worsened faster than I anticipated. I'm dying, Lycaon. That's precisely how I was discovered. My husband, my other husband, may his soul rest wherever souls like his are sent, never revealed what I truly am to anyone even before he passed. But he still made certain, before he died, that my son would never sit on that throne regardless." My hands curled into fists, nails biting into my palms. "So now Johann has been cast aside entirely, and some distant relative sits exactly where my son should be sitting. Everything I built, decades of careful, patient work, is on the verge of collapsing into ash."

"That's unfortunate," he said, entirely too lightly for the weight of what I'd just confessed.

"But I'm here now," he continued. "I can help."

"Lycaon—"

"Drop it. Your son is royal blood, isn't he?"

"Of course he is."

"Then we take that seat back," he said, something eager entering his tone now. It sounded like the old restless hunger I remembered from how long I knew him and now it was flickering hot behind the witch's borrowed eyes. "All I need is to be properly released. My prison sits inside the Alpha King's study. It only unlocks through royal blood." His eyes held mine, steady, insistent. "If your son—"

I scoffed, cutting him off before he could finish the thought.

"You abandoned me," I said. "For years, Lycaon. Without a word. And now you walk back into my life wearing someone else's face, without so much as an apology, and the very first thing you ask of me is help freeing you from a cage you put yourself in. Is that why you sought me out?"

"I don't want to fight with you, Edie." His voice softened, and something in that softness nearly undid me faster than his earlier bravado had.

"I acknowledge everything you've sacrificed," he continued. "Your womb, given to a werewolf, in hopes of breaking a curse that was never truly yours to carry alone. A son raised in enemy territory, alone, while I was gone, imprisoned after chasing whatever it is I was chasing." He shook his head slowly. "But this isn't the moment for old grievances. We have a real chance now, a genuine one, and they won't see it coming. So help me."

"No," I said.

Something dangerous flickered across his borrowed face.

"If we truly want them blindsided," I said, forcing steadiness into my voice, "you're far safer remaining exactly where you are. In that state. In that body. This witch, and her entire house, have served the royal family faithfully for generations now. This is a face they trust completely. No one will suspect a Shelter witch of anything." I straightened my spine. "Once my son properly sits on that throne, once this curse finally breaks for good, I will personally see you released."

"You cannot be serious."

"I am."

"If you're so unhappy with that arrangement," I added, watching his expression carefully, "you remain free to walk away entirely, exactly as you always have historically done whenever something failed to suit you or bored you."

Something dark passed behind his stolen eyes. "You always do precisely what you want, don't you, Edie?"

"That would be you. After all, with all the power you supposedly possess," I said, my voice trembling now despite every effort to steady it, "you haven't managed to break this damned curse for any of us in centuries. I refuse to let your temper undo decades of careful work I've built brick by brick with my own hands. Help me from exactly where you stand now, and you receive everything, in full, at the very end. That is the arrangement I'm offering."

Chapter 78: In the middle 2

EDELINA

He was quiet a long moment, the witch's jaw working with tension that clearly didn't belong to her natural expressions.

"My mother is directly involved in all of this," he said finally, low and rough. "She preaches endlessly about free will, about rules she insists she cannot break even as a goddess herself, and still finds new ways to torment me at every possible turn. You couldn't possibly understand what that feels like, Edie. I want this curse broken too. But it is harder for me."

"Oh please. My bones ache constantly right now," I said, my own voice hardening. "I will die soon. Genuinely die, permanently, unlike whatever fate you're currently enduring. And you don't hear me complaining endlessly about the unfairness of any of it." I let that land fully before continuing. "I worry, honestly, that you've lost all perspective, having infinite time stretched out in front of you. You are immortal, Lycaon. Yes, the full moon brings you agony when you're forced into that mindless form. But pain, for you, remains simply an inconvenience. You will survive it regardless, every single time. The rest of us were never granted that particular luxury."

His breath left him slow and heavy, something almost wounded threading through it now.

"I'm currently sitting in a tank filled with liquid silver and wolfsbane," he said. "Electrocuted repeatedly, like some laboratory specimen. I remain in constant pain as well, Edie. Every single hour."

"But you're still alive," I said. "Anyone else would already be dead a dozen times over, given exactly what's been done to you. That's the difference between us, and it always has been."

He sighed, and something in his borrowed shoulders finally eased, whatever fight had been building there draining slowly away.

"I suppose you're right," he said quietly. "What exactly is your plan, then?"

"There's a rogue," I said. "One whose services I personally arranged. They currently hold him in custody. It's only a matter of time before he breaks completely and starts talking. The High Beta is already investigating both myself and my son as well and that rogue will nail the coffin in. It does not help that the boy currently sitting as regent, the one who stole my son's rightful seat right out from under him, is a vile, cruel little bastard who didn't even flinch before putting a blade to his own father's neck and ending his life." My jaw tightened at the memory of Lysander's calm, unbothered face across that infirmary. "They'll find a way to make that rogue confess eventually. I have no doubt of that."

"Then I'll handle him," Lycaon said. "With proper magic behind it, silencing a single rogue should prove simple enough and ensuring it cannot be tracked back."

Something in my chest loosened at that, warmth spreading through me despite everything wrong about this entire conversation, despite every reasonable instinct telling me not to trust a single word coming out of a stolen mouth.

"I missed you," I said, quieter now, my guard slipping despite my every effort to hold it in place. "There were so many nights I convinced myself you'd simply been cruel. Abandoning me on that seat while you went looking for something. Some feeling, I suppose. Something to make you feel less like the immortal thing you actually are."

He pressed a kiss to my forehead, gentle, achingly familiar despite everything wrong about the body delivering it, and something in me unraveled that I'd kept carefully sealed shut for longer than I wanted to admit even to myself.

"For many nights," he said, "I reached for you. I believed there'd eventually come a moment when the universe allowed our dreams to properly cross paths again. It never happened. Not once, in all those years."

"Why?" I questioned, my voice breaking slightly on the single word.

"Because I could feel you were close," he said. "So I dreamed of you instead, Edie. Every single night, whether or not you ever knew it."

Tears blurred my vision before I could stop them from falling.

"But why did you leave in the first place," I said. "What different life were you even chasing, that was worth leaving me behind for?"

"Does it matter now?"

"I wish we'd had a fated bond," I said, the confession spilling out of me raw and unguarded. "Then you would never have been able to keep secrets from me. Not a single one."

"I don't have any secrets that actually matter," he said.

"I don't believe that for a moment," I said. "The son of a goddess is bound to carry plenty of secrets, whether he admits to them or not. And you remain as shielded as anyone I've ever known, in any lifetime."

He smiled then, and for one suspended, impossible second I could see him clearly, truly see him, the man I'd first known centuries ago before any of this wreckage began. White hair. White lashes. White brows catching light like frost settling over glass.

"There's a healer here," I said slowly, something cold sliding back into my chest as the memory returned in full. "Like the ones from the age of legend. Her features, Lycaon. They're just like yours."

"Is that so?" he said, something careful entering his tone now, a wariness I hadn't heard from him yet tonight.

I nodded. "For one moment, I even thought—" I stopped myself.

"What?"

"That she was connected to you somehow," I admitted. "But then I remembered. Selene sealed the womb of every woman who'd known your touch, specifically to ensure another like you could never taint this world a second time."

"My mother is remarkably talented when it comes to cruelty," he said. "But I've fought fate before, Edie, and I'll fight it again if the need ever arises. I don't know this healer, and I have no particular interest in learning more about her right now. What matters to me currently is earning your trust back properly, and finally breaking this curse for our people. I won't fail you a second time. I swear it."

The witch snapped her fingers, and the shimmering bubble surrounding us popped with a soft, almost gentle sound, the pressure in the room releasing all at once. The door behind me clicked open.

"Find a way to keep me here," he said. "In this body, close enough to you so I can act the moment we need to move."

I nodded, still trembling slightly.

"I'll find the rogue," he added, already turning toward the door, the witch's stride carrying something unmistakably his despite everything wrong about the shape of it. "And I'll end him myself, quietly, before he ever gets the chance to talk."

I watched Lycaon walk out wearing another woman's face entirely, and once the door shut fully behind him, I turned back toward the mirror above the sink.

The tears I'd been holding back for longer than I could properly measure finally broke loose completely, and I stood there alone, gripping the porcelain edge with both hands, sobbing quietly into an empty bathroom.

Chapter 79: Can I ask a question?

BONNIE

We made it back to his mother's room in a silence that wasn't quite comfortable and wasn't quite anything else either, just tired, the kind that settled into your bones after a night that refused to end. Delta was waiting outside the door when we arrived, arms crossed, looking like she'd been standing there long enough to grow roots.

"I need you to watch over her," Lysander said, already halfway to turning it into an order rather than a request.

"Of course, Alpha Lysander."

I looked between them, some stubborn little thing rising in my chest before I'd decided whether I wanted to let it.

"It would be nice," I said, keeping my voice light, almost careless, as though the words meant nothing, "if you could stay too."

He looked at me for a beat too long.

"I have other things I should probably see to," he said, though there wasn't much conviction behind it.

He looked at me for a beat too long.

"I have other things I should probably see to," he said, though there wasn't much conviction behind it.

I shrugged, turning my attention back toward the room.

"Yeah, sure. I understand."

That seemed to catch him off guard more than an argument would have.

His gaze lingered on me. "You do?"

I glanced at him.

"Of course I do." I gave him a small, easy smile. "You're the Regent. I'm sure you have more important things to do than sit here and keep me company."

There was no accusation in my voice, which somehow seemed to make him look more uncomfortable.

"I didn't say I did not want to keep you company."

"I know."

I settled back against the pillows, deliberately making myself comfortable, as if the conversation had already ended.

For several seconds, he said nothing.

Then he exhaled slowly.

"Actually," he said, looking toward the door as though he'd only just remembered something terribly inconvenient, "most of those things can wait."

I bit back a smile.

"Can they?"

"Yes."

He said it with enough authority to make it sound like the decision had been his from the beginning.

"Good," I murmured, closing my eyes. "Then you should probably stay."

There was a pause.

"I suppose I will."

I smiled to myself.

He really did have a remarkable talent for pretending he hadn't just done exactly what I'd wanted.

Delta's gaze flicked between us, something quietly knowing settling into her expression. She cleared her throat and began backing toward the door before either of us could acknowledge the obvious.

"I'll just be down the hall," she said. "If either of you need anything."

She was gone before I could tell her that wasn't necessary, the door clicking shut behind her with the particular quiet of someone who understood exactly what she was doing.

Lysander stared at the closed door for a moment before looking back at me. Something in his shoulders had eased.

"Hmmm," he said. "That was an interesting reaction from her, don't you think?"

"I think she just understood that if you were here, I would be fine."

He looked at me for a moment.

"Is that what you think?"

I glanced at him, immediately regretting it when I found him already watching me.

"What else would I think?"

"Nothing."

"Good."

"Good."

The silence that followed was somehow worse than the one we'd walked back in.

I looked toward the other side of the bed, then at him.

"You should probably sit down."

"I probably should."

He settled onto the bed, and it was just like we had before, with the pillow wedged between us as a border neither of us had actually bothered enforcing the last time. I stared at the ceiling, exhaustion pulling at every part of me even though I knew sleep wasn't an option for the remainder of tonight. Fia hadn't arrived yet, and until she did, I was apparently condemned to remain awake and miserable about it.

"I'm so tired," I murmured, mostly to the ceiling. "All I want to do is sleep, and apparently that's too much to ask."

"We can talk instead," he said. "If that helps you take your mind off it."

I turned my head slightly to look at him.

"About what?"

"Anything."

There was something almost too easy about the answer, and I looked away before I could think too much about why I liked it.

"You're going to regret offering that."

A quiet laugh escaped him.

"I doubt it."

I smiled despite myself and settled deeper into the pillows.

For someone who had supposedly been considering leaving, he seemed remarkably comfortable staying.

"Okay. But I do need a push in the right direction. Like... What topic could we talk about? I do think in a lot of ways that matter, we are still strangers."

"Like I said. Anything," he said. "It doesn't have to be important."

I turned my head to look at him. "Okay. Favorite food."

"That's where you want to start?"

"I want to start somewhere boring," I said. "I've had enough excitement for three lifetimes tonight."

He considered it seriously, like I'd asked him something with actual stakes attached. "Honestly, it's something embarrassingly simple. Meat pies. The kind street vendors sell, not the fancy court version with truffle in it that tastes like dirt pretending to be food."

"Truffle tastes like dirt pretending to be food," I repeated, delighted despite myself. "That's such a specific hill to die on."

"I stand by it."

"Fine. My turn." I thought about it. "Bread. Any kind. I'm not picky. Just give me bread, and I'm content."

"That's not a food preference. That sounds more to me like living on survival instinct."

"Same thing, honestly."

He laughed, low and genuine, and something in my chest loosened at the sound.

"Okay," I said. "Worst thing about being an Alpha?"

"Meetings," he said instantly, without hesitation. "Endless meetings. About taxes. Border disputes nobody actually cares about. Whether the annual harvest festival should last three or four days. I know it will be worse if I do finally become King."

"How many days do you usually land on?"

"I have genuinely no idea. I stop listening around the second hour."

I laughed. "And you still make a decision?"

"I nod very seriously and say I'd take it under advisement."

"That's such an Alpha thing to say."

"It works nine times out of ten."

"What happens the tenth time?"

He turned his head toward me, a faint smile pulling at the corner of his mouth.

"Someone is clever enough to realize I wasn't listening."

"And what do you do then?"

"Depends."

"On what?"

"On whether I like them."

I raised an eyebrow. "That's terribly convenient."

"It is."

"And if you do like them?"

His eyes stayed on mine for a second longer than necessary.

"I blame it on some midlife crisis and listen."

Something about the way he said it made the question suddenly feel less harmless than it had a moment ago.

I looked away first.

"Okay," I said, reaching for another question before he could notice the effect he'd had.
"What is your favorite place to be?"

He smiled faintly.

"You're changing the subject."

"I am absolutely not."

"You are."

"Answer the question."

He let out a quiet laugh.

"Fine. Favorite place?"

"Yes."

He thought about it for a moment.

"Honestly, anywhere I don't have to be an Alpha."

I looked at him again.

That answer was quieter than the others.

"And where is that?"

His gaze met mine. "Wish I had an answer."

To heal a Rogue

BONNIE

Something in his voice made me look at him again.

The teasing smile was gone.

"My father was very authoritarian," he said after a moment. "Given that you were Lily of the Valley, for a while, I suppose you already know that."

I nodded slowly.

"I never had it as bad as the lower ranks did," he continued. "I was his son. His heir, after all. There were things he expected from me that he would never have expected from anyone else, but there were also things he would never have done to me because I was supposed to become him."

He gave a humorless little smile.

"That was the problem, I think. He wanted me to be a miniature version of himself, and I let him."

"Why?"

"Because I thought it was the only way out."

His gaze drifted toward the ceiling.

"I watched the way he treated people he loved. The way he controlled them, broke them down, made them afraid of disappointing him. Eventually, I realized something rather simple. The only person who could remain completely unscathed by my father was my father himself."

His fingers shifted against the blanket.

"So I became good at mirroring him. I learned what he wanted to hear. I learned when to be cruel, when to be silent, when to make people afraid of me. I did my best to become exactly what he wanted."

He paused.

"But even I had a limit."

I watched his expression change, the weight of the memories settling more heavily across his features.

"There were roads I couldn't bring myself to cross."

For a moment, neither of us spoke.

"Sometimes," he said quietly, "I wonder if I'm exactly like him anyway."

I frowned.

"I can be violent."

His voice had gone almost flat.

"Not the sort of violence people can excuse because they're angry. Horrible violence. The kind that makes you wonder what sort of person you have to be to do it."

He swallowed.

"And sometimes I think I'll look back one day and feel sick about what I've done."

I didn't know what to say to that.

He gave a faint, bitter smile.

"It's not all the time, and I believe that is somehow worse. Sometimes I can look in a mirror and see myself just fine."

His eyes finally met mine.

"And sometimes I swear I can still see him looking back."

My chest tightened.

Without really thinking about it, I reached across the space between us and took his hand.

He looked down at our joined hands.

He didn't pull away.

"I killed my father to protect Fia," he said.

My fingers tightened around his. He was completely shedding. Telling me things I was fairly certain I was not supposed to know.

"He was obsessed with the healers from the Age of Legend. He liked what they were capable of. If he'd succeeded in getting his hands on her..." He stopped, jaw tightening. "I knew her fate would be worse than death."

The room seemed to grow quieter around us.

"So I killed him." He drew in a slow breath. "But I wasn't even brave enough to face what I'd done and take the fall for it."

His thumb moved once against my hand, almost absently.

"I took another life and put it all on her."

I stayed silent.

"I told myself at the time that it was justified because she was a horrible person. That she'd done enough to deserve whatever happened to her."

His mouth twisted.

"But that crime wasn't hers to carry."

He looked down at our hands. "It was mine."

I tightened my grip. "You're clearly carrying it."

A short laugh escaped him, almost surprised.

"I guess that's part of it too." He leaned his head back against the wall. "The baggage of being an Alpha. You keep carrying it."

His expression softened, but only slightly.

"I even feel guilty for you."

"Why?" I questioned.

"My father is the reason your life is so messed up."

I shook my head. "No."

He looked at me, and I continued.

"Being a healer is the reason my life is so messed up."

His eyebrows lifted.

I shrugged.

"If there is someone I want to blame, it would probably be the goddess Selene."

For one second, he stared at me.

Then he laughed.

It was sudden and completely unrestrained, so unexpected that I couldn't even figure out what was funny about what I'd said.

"What?" I asked, already laughing because he was.

"Nothing." He said back.

"You're laughing."

"I know."

"Then tell me what's funny."

"I don't know."

That only made me laugh harder.

He shook his head, still grinning, and for the first time since he'd started talking about his father, the heaviness in his face disappeared.

I didn't understand why that was what broke him.

But I was glad it did.

"Okay, my turn again," he said once I'd caught my breath. "Worst thing about being an Omega? Aside, of course, from the many, many cons."

Something in his expression shifted, gentler now.

"And you don't have to answer that if it's too—"

"No, I want to." I shifted against the pillows. "It's fine."

I thought about it for a moment.

"Honestly? It's the way people decide what I am before I ever get the chance to tell them."

His expression grew more serious.

"People assume I'm weaker, that I'm less capable. Less intelligent. Less suited to anything that requires authority." I rolled my eyes. "And some of them aren't even subtle about it. They look at an Omega and decide they've already figured out exactly how far they are allowed to go."

I shifted against the pillows.

"That's actually why I had to dream higher when I infiltrated the palace as a retainer."

He looked at me with renewed interest.

"I knew what people thought an Omega should be. Quiet. Useful. Grateful for whatever position and grace they are given. Certainly not ambitious enough to walk into a place where decisions are made and ensure they had a semblance of a voice."

A small smile touched my mouth.

"So I decided that if they were going to underestimate me anyway, I might as well make them underestimate me all the way, and it fucking worked. Which is still so insane to think about."

He laughed softly.

"That sounds like you."

"It was exhausting and also mildly infuriating."

"I imagine," he said. "But the good thing is that times are changing."

I looked at him.

"Are they?"

"They are."

He shifted against the pillows, his expression becoming more thoughtful.

"We keep losing people to rogues. Whole groups of them. Omegas especially. Everyone knows what happens when they get caught in the wrong place, and the old systems that were supposed to protect them haven't exactly been doing a brilliant job."

There was something grim in his voice.

"Lily of the Valley used to lose Omegas to the rogue pipeline all the time. People knew. They looked the other way. Or they decided it was someone else's problem."

My smile faded.

"But things are changing. Slowly, perhaps, but they are. There are more protections now. More people now actually investigate when Omegas disappear rather than simply recording them as missing. More Alphas willing to put their names behind reforms that would have been unthinkable a generation ago."

He looked at me.

"We're still losing people. I won't pretend otherwise. But we're doing the work, and it is not as bad as before."

I studied him for a moment. This was what Delta had been talking about. But it was hard to be optimistic. A man against the institution? It was a losing game.

"It takes more than a man to break an institution." I eventually managed.