

To heal a Rogue

c 81-90

Chapter 81: The Way You Look at Me

BONNIE

He went quiet.

I expected him to argue.

Instead, he seemed to consider it genuinely.

"Perhaps that's why being Alpha King matters," he said eventually. "I am starting to wonder if it is not such a bad idea."

I raised an eyebrow. "Or maybe you are starting to like the power that it gives?"

"I wish that was the case. But there have been so many attempts on the throne that it no longer seems so fun. I mean business when I say that." He then turned slightly toward me. "An Alpha King who only knows how to command isn't particularly useful. But one who understands where the problems are..." His gaze held mine. "That could actually change something."

I narrowed my eyes. "Well... Do be careful."

His mouth curved.

"It would be nice to have a Queen who knows what needs to change at its roots."

I stared at him.

He stared back.

There was absolutely no mistaking what he'd just done.

I looked away first.

"The only reason I'm not ending this conversation after that particularly brave move," I said, "is because I actually like talking to you. For now at least."

He smiled at that.

"But I would advise you to tread carefully, Your Majesty."

His smile only widened at that.

"It sounds hot when you say it like that."

I turned to look at him, completely unimpressed.

"I guess I'm never saying it again, then."

"You can't take it back."

"Watch me."

He laughed, and I tried very hard not to smile.

I failed.

When the quiet settled after, I went back to my questions.

"Okay, on to the next. What is something you're bad at?"

"Dancing," he replied.

"No. I find that very hard to believe."

"I am genuinely terrible. Especially if I do not have much practice beforehand or if it is impromptu. Ask anyone who's ever partnered me at a formal event. I have stepped on more toes than I care to admit."

"I refuse to believe that. I'm the one with that issue. I suck at dancing."

He seemed to be in disbelief that I said that. "Oh please, you move like you know exactly where every part of your body is at all times."

"That's fighting. Fighting makes sense to me. Dancing is just fighting with rules I don't understand and a partner who expects me to be gentle about it."

I laughed at my own explanation, and he watched me do it with an expression I couldn't quite read if I was to read into it. It was something soft and a little too focused for a conversation about dancing.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing," he said. "I just noticed that you have a very nice laugh. I don't think I've heard it properly before tonight."

Heat crept up my neck, and I looked away before he could watch that too.

When I turned back, my head was back on the right track. I hoped it was.

"Hmmm... Your turn," I said, mostly to redirect. "Ask me something."

He shifted onto his side to face me properly, propping his head on one hand, and the movement brought him close enough that I could feel the warmth coming off him.

"I do have a question," he said.

"Shoot."

He studied my face for a moment, something considering in his eyes. "Your hair. Did your mother have it too? The color?"

I shook my head slowly. "No. Hers was dark and ordinary. Nothing like this."

"What about your father?"

Something in me went quiet at that. An old, worn-down ache surfaced before I could stop it.

"I didn't really know him," I said. "He wasn't around. My mother never talked about him much, and I stopped asking eventually, because every time I did, something in her face would close up entirely." I picked at the edge of the blanket. "So I genuinely have no idea where the hair color comes from. It just showed up when I was born, apparently, and never left."

"That must have been strange," he said. "Growing up looking like that, with no one to explain why."

"It made me a target," I said. "Before it made me anything else. People decided what it meant about me before I ever got the chance to decide for myself."

His hand found mine on top of the blanket, fingers threading through carefully, like he was giving me every chance to pull away if I wanted to. I didn't.

"I'm sorry," he said. "That you had to carry that alone."

"I'm used to it."

"That doesn't make it right."

I looked up at him, and something in his expression had gone entirely serious now, the easy banter from a moment ago replaced with something heavier, something that made my breath catch a little in my chest.

"You keep doing that," I said.

"Doing what?"

"Looking at me like that."

His brows lifted slightly. "Like what?"

I gave him a look.

"You know exactly what I mean."

"I don't."

"Liar."

A smile tugged at his mouth, but it didn't quite reach his eyes.

For a moment, he said nothing. He just looked at me, his expression changing in a way I couldn't quite place. The amusement faded first, leaving something quieter behind it.

"You know," he said, his voice lower now, "you've been doing the same thing all night."

My brows drew together. "Doing what?"

"Looking at me like you want something, then pretending you don't."

My breath caught. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

His smile returned, faint and knowing.

"You do," he said, simple and immediate, with no hesitation at all.

I stared at him.

He didn't look away.

The space between us had shrunk without either of us deciding to close it, and I could feel his breath against my mouth now, warm and unhurried. My heart was doing something entirely inconvenient, hammering against my ribs like it had somewhere urgent to be.

"Lysander," I said, though I wasn't entirely sure what I meant to follow it.

"Yes?"

I didn't answer with words.

I closed the last of the distance myself, and his mouth met mine like he'd been waiting for exactly that permission the entire night.

The kiss started slow and careful. It was the kind of kiss that asked a question rather than made a demand. Then his restraint finally snapped, and the answer came with it.

His hand slid to the back of my head, fingers threading into my hair as he pulled me closer, and the sudden intensity of it stole whatever breath I had left. I caught the quiet, rough sound that escaped him against my mouth, and something hot unfurled low in my stomach.

I kissed him back harder.

Whatever hesitation had kept us circling each other all night disappeared. His mouth moved against mine with a hunger that made my fingers curl into his shirt, and when he tilted his head and deepened the kiss, I felt myself melt into him before I could think better of it.

His other hand settled at my waist, firm and warm, drawing me closer until there was barely any space left between us.

I should have been thinking about Fia.

I should have been thinking about the fact that crazy shit was happening all around us.

Instead, I could only think about the way he was kissing me.

And the way I'd wanted him to for far longer than I was willing to admit.

Chapter 82: With a bang 1

LYCAON

I found a healer alone in the corridor, one hand braced beneath a stack of files as she hurried toward the next ward. I reached out as I passed and let my fingers settle lightly against her forearm.

She barely had time to glance at me before I slipped a thin thread of magic beneath her skin.

Her steps faltered.

Then her eyes went completely black.

The pupils flooded outward until nothing recognizably human remained, and when she turned to face me again, there was only that glassy, obedient emptiness I had come to enjoy.

"Hey, friend," I said through the witch's borrowed mouth, pitching my voice soft and casual, the way young women spoke to one another when they wanted a small favor and expected to get it. "I need your help with something."

"Anything, bestie."

"Where's the rogue they brought in tonight?"

She answered immediately.

"There's a private containment room at the end of the east wing," she said. "Past the surgical bay. It's behind the reinforced door marked for high-risk patients."

"The one with the cameras?" I asked. "I'd rather know what I'm walking into."

She nodded.

"Yeah. There are two cameras outside and one inside. Armed guards are stationed at the entrance, too."

I had to bite back a laugh.

Of course there were.

Mortals loved their little fortresses. Locks. Cameras. Reinforced doors. Armed men standing around with weapons they genuinely believed would make a difference.

"And the room itself?" I asked.

"It has reinforced walls and no windows."

"How reassuring."

She shifted the files in her arms, her expression remaining perfectly vacant.

"No one who isn't supposed to be there will get out once they're inside."

That made me smile.

"I'll see about that."

I gave her arm a gentle squeeze.

"Thank you, bestie."

"Anytime."

"One more favor," I said, already withdrawing the magic from her mind. "Forget we had this conversation."

"Of course."

I released her completely.

She blinked once.

Then twice.

The blackness receded from her eyes, color returning to her irises as confusion flickered briefly across her face. She glanced down at the files in her arms, adjusted the stack against her chest, and continued down the corridor.

She never looked back.

By the time she disappeared around the corner, the conversation was already gone from her mind.

I turned toward the east wing.

A private containment room... Reinforced walls... Cameras... and armed guards.

They had gone to a great deal of trouble to keep their rogue contained. I was almost curious to see how long it would take me to ruin all of it.

I walked the route she'd given me at an unhurried pace, shapeshifting as I went and now wearing the healer I'd just spoken to's shape like a comfortable old coat that fit better with each passing second, unbothered by the late hour or the low murmur of activity still humming through the infirmary's distant wards.

A camera watched from the corner of one hallway, its small red light blinking with patient, mechanical persistence.

I waved at it first, almost fondly, the way you'd wave at a child pretending to guard something important, and then flicked two fingers toward it and tore the mechanism apart from the inside out.

Wires snapped loose in a shower of sparks, the lens shattered with a sharp pop, and the ruined casing sagged against the wall before going dark.

I kept walking as a small bubble of magic settled around me, swallowing the corridor in a pocket of silence that would keep whatever happened next from reaching the rest of the infirmary.

A sentinel stepped into my path before I reached the door, rifle already angled across his chest, and his posture carrying the particular seriousness men adopted when they believed themselves to be the last line of defense against something they didn't understand.

"Only the head healer is permitted past this point."

"Blame yourself," I said, almost gentle about it, "for being so damn loyal to a job that's about to get you killed."

His hand moved toward his sidearm, fast and practiced, the reflex of someone trained since boyhood to react before conscious thought could interfere. I caught his wrist before his fingers could close around the weapon and held it there, suspended uselessly between us.

His eyes widened as he finally understood that whatever he had been trained to fight, it was not me.

I closed my fingers.

His skull collapsed inward with a sickening crunch.

For a fraction of a second, his face remained almost perfectly intact, his mouth hanging open around whatever words his brain had been preparing to form. Then the pressure inside his head became too much. His eyes ruptured first, spilling bloody fluid down his cheeks, followed by the wet splitting sound of bone giving way beneath the force of my magic.

The top of his skull burst apart.

Blood, brain matter, splintered bone and strands of tissue sprayed across the wall behind him, spattering the sterile white surface and sliding down in thick, uneven trails. A piece

of his scalp slapped wetly against the floor beside my boot while something that looked disturbingly like a portion of his jaw landed several feet away.

His body remained standing for another heartbeat, trembling violently as blood poured from the ruined cavity above his neck, before his knees finally gave out.

He folded onto the floor with a heavy, boneless thud.

The rifle slipped from his fingers and clattered beside him.

I stepped around the spreading pool of blood, crouched, and picked up the weapon before continuing toward the containment room.

Three more sentinels rounded the corner at the sound of the commotion, weapons already raised and tracking, shouting something I didn't bother listening to closely. I threw a thin shield around the borrowed body fast enough that their first volley struck it and flattened against the invisible barrier, bullets spinning uselessly through the air before dropping around my feet with little metallic clinks.

I let myself fall anyway, collapsing with enough theatrical weight that one of them immediately spoke into the small radio pinned to his collar.

"Threat neutralized. Repeat, threat neutralized."

Apparently, they were eager to believe it.

One of them approached to confirm the kill, moving cautiously with his weapon still trained on my motionless body. He had almost reached me when I opened my eyes and fired from the stolen gun.

The bullet entered beneath his jaw and tore through the back of his skull, spraying blood and fragments of bone across the wall behind him. His body jerked violently before collapsing forward, his weapon striking the floor a moment before the rest of him followed.

The remaining two stumbled backward.

I was already on my feet.

I shot the first through the hand before he could raise his weapon again. His fingers burst apart around the grip, blood and shattered bone spraying across the tiles as the rifle slipped from what remained of his hand. Before he could even finish screaming, I put the next bullet through his forehead, the back of his skull opening against the wall behind him in a wet explosion that left him sliding slowly to the floor.

The last sentinel turned to run because apparently, his magazine was fucked and he needed to reload.

I wasted no time because I only had seconds before this became a problem for me.

Chapter 83: With a bang 2

LYCAON

A thread of raw magic snapped from my fingers and wrapped around his head before he made it three steps. His body jerked to a stop, his arms flailing uselessly as an invisible pressure closed around his skull.

I tightened my grip without mercy.

His head caved inward with a wet, ugly crunch.

Blood poured down the sides of his face as his eyes bulged, then burst beneath the pressure. His knees buckled, and he collapsed beside the others, leaving a smear of blood across the otherwise immaculate floor.

I looked over the three bodies and stepped carefully between them, making my way into the ward proper.

The rogue lay chained to a narrow bed near the far wall, his wrists and ankles secured with heavy restraints. His eyes were closed, his breathing slow and measured, but I clocked that it was in that particular careful rhythm people used when they were pretending sleep had claimed them and hoping desperately that whoever was watching would believe the performance.

I walked to the bedside and let the witch's features settle back into their natural lines.

"I suggest you stop pretending to be asleep. That cannot save you now."

His eyes snapped open immediately.

They darted toward the bodies he could see behind me before returning to my face, and whatever he saw there made his expression tighten.

"Do you work for the Alliance Against Ranks too?" he asked, his voice hoarse and thin from whatever they'd already put him through that night.

"I don't believe in ranks," I said. "I'm a top dog. Always have been, long before this entire species learned to walk upright."

"Release me." He strained against the restraints binding his wrists to the frame, though whatever they'd done to him had left him with barely enough strength to make the chains rattle. "They'll be coming for me in droves soon. You don't want to be here when they do."

"Poor you." I managed something close to sympathy. "But I'm not here to be your salvation, child. I myself need that."

I studied his face for another moment, taking in the bruising, the dried blood at his temple, the exhaustion that had settled into the hollows beneath his eyes.

"You know secrets," I continued, tilting my head slightly, "secrets that could unravel someone that is currently rather important to me if they ever slipped past your lips. I have to make certain that never happens. Nothing personal in it, truly."

I raised my hand.

His entire body stiffened.

Then he began struggling in earnest, throwing what little strength remained in him against the restraints. The chains rattled violently against the metal frame, his breathing turning ragged as he realized exactly what I intended to do.

"Wait."

I kept raising my hand.

"Did the Queen send you to assassinate me?" Panic finally broke clean through his composure. "That bitch! No... no... no... Wait, wait, please!"

His voice cracked on the last word.

"Even if you kill me," he rushed on, "they're already calling in a delicate. Everything gets discovered eventually, one way or another. I can't be found here, dead or alive, so you're better off taking me somewhere else alive."

"Hmmm."

I considered that.

"That's clever."

His expression changed immediately, hope flashing across his face so quickly it was almost amusing.

Then I smiled.

"I'll use the red, then."

The hope vanished, and he asked. "What is that? What is the red?"

I did not tell him. Who the fuck was he? I did ponder using it. The red was something I could only use once a day, which made it too valuable to waste casually. But this was precisely the sort of situation it was meant for. A delicate could never look into me, which meant poofing the dead sentinels outside from existence was ultimately irrelevant. But this rogue... Even if I would escape unscathed, Edie would not. So it needed to be done. Whatever traces remained here would be reduced to something no paranormal investigation could ever recover.

His eyes widened as the realization settled in.

"No."

I continued the gesture.

"No, wait. I have so much to live for. I thought I wanted to die, but I don't. I don't want to die."

He pulled desperately against the restraints, his voice climbing into something raw and ugly.

"Please. I'll do anything. Whatever you want, I'll be your slave. Just don't—"

He never finished.

I completed the motion I'd already begun.

His head burst apart in a violent spray of blood, bone and tissue that struck the wall and ceiling behind the bed, spattering the sheets and metal frame before gravity dragged the mess downward in thick red trails.

I didn't give it time to settle.

A different light bloomed from my fingertips.

Deep crimson.

It spread outward in a widening wave, swallowing the bed frame first, then the body, the blood, the scattered fragments of bone and brain matter, and finally the stained wall

behind him. Everything it touched began to break apart, flesh and metal and paint collapsing into fine ash that lifted briefly into the air before mostly disappearing.

Within seconds, there was nothing left.

No body.

No blood.

No chains holding a corpse to the bed.

Not even a stain on the wall to suggest that someone had been murdered there.

The room probably stood exactly as it had before they brought him in, sterile and empty, as though the rogue had never existed at all.

Then I heard boots pounding down the corridor.

Several sets.

They were close. Very close.

Someone shouted an order outside, followed by the metallic clatter of weapons being readied.

I looked toward the door.

Apparently, the rest had finally arrived.

I dug quickly through the witch's borrowed memory, searching through the layers of formal training and practical knowledge until I found what I needed: a small concealment spell designed for stealth rather than combat. It was hardly impressive magic, but I only needed it to do one thing.

Hide me.

I cast it in a single breath.

The spell folded around my body, bending light and perception just enough to make me indistinguishable from the empty space around me. I could feel how thin the veil was almost immediately, the magic straining at the edges and threatening to unravel beneath the slightest disruption. It would buy me seconds, perhaps a handful if I was fortunate, but seconds were all I required.

I stepped out of the empty room just as the door behind me exploded inward.

Boots thundered across the threshold. Voices barked orders. Weapons came up as several sentinels poured into the room, their eyes sweeping over the spotless walls and the complete absence of the intruder and prisoner they'd been racing toward.

None of them saw me.

I lingered in the doorway anyway, invisible and utterly unhurried, watching the confusion spread through them.

Then the man leading the charge stepped into view.

I recognized him immediately.

High fucking Beta Bradley.

I had hated that face for longer than his entire insignificant little life could ever hope to comprehend, and I knew with absolute certainty that I would continue despising him across centuries long after his brief existence had been reduced to nothing more than a forgotten name.

I wanted to kill him now, even. But that could wait. It had to wait.

I then walked off.

To heal a Rogue

BONNIE

His mouth was devastating. That was the only word for it, the way he took control of the kiss, the way his tongue slid against mine with deliberate, devastating skill. I hadn't expected him to be this good. I hadn't expected my whole body to light up like a match struck against dry tinder, every nerve ending suddenly awake and screaming for more.

I made a sound against his mouth, something embarrassingly needy, and he swallowed it like he'd been starving for it. His fingers tightened in my hair, not pulling hard enough to hurt, but firm enough to let me know exactly who had me. The possessiveness of it sent a thrill shooting down my spine, pooling hot and heavy between my thighs.

A part of me did know I was not supposed to be doing this. Giving him hope. But was that what this was? Could I really lie to myself that I was simply doing this to get my head off things that had happened or it was simply the fact that I wanted this. That I wanted him.

"Bonnie," he breathed against my lips, and the way he said my name, like a prayer, like a curse, made me shiver.

I pushed at his chest, not to get him away, but to get him where I wanted him. He understood immediately, rolling onto his back and pulling me with him until I was straddling his hips, the blanket tangled somewhere around our legs. I could feel him hard and thick beneath me, straining against the fabric of his trousers, and the knowledge that I did that to him—that I made the composed, untouchable soon to be Alpha King come undone—went straight to my head like good wine.

"You're wearing too many clothes," I said, my voice rough in a way I didn't recognize.

His eyes darkened, pupils blown wide with desire. "So are you."

He was wrong. I had this thin, nearly sheer gown on, but he was probably just seeing red from his hunger.

I caught the hem of the gown and lifted it over my head in one swift motion, letting the cool air brush against my skin as I stood before him in nothing but my bra and panties. I didn't feel cold, not with the way he was looking at me, like I was the only thing in the world worth seeing. His gaze traced the curve of my breasts, the dip of my waist, and when he reached out to touch me, his hands were almost reverent.

"Beautiful," he murmured, and then his palms were cupping me through the thin lace, thumbs brushing over my nipples with maddening patience.

I arched into his touch, grinding down against him without meaning to, and we both groaned at the friction. He felt impossibly hard, and I was already wet, the fabric between us doing nothing to dull the sensation. I rolled my hips experimentally, and his grip on my waist turned bruising.

"Fuck," he gritted out, his head falling back against the pillow. "Do that again."

I did. I set a slow, torturous rhythm, rocking against him while his hands roamed my body like he was mapping me, learning every curve and sensitive spot. He found the clasp of my bra and unhooked it with practiced ease, and then his mouth was on my breast, hot and wet and perfect. His tongue circled my nipple before he sucked hard, and I cried out, my rhythm faltering as pleasure spiked through me.

"Don't stop," he commanded against my skin, his voice rough and authoritative in a way that made me obey immediately.

I kept moving, riding the hard line of him through our clothes, the pressure building in my core with every roll of my hips. He switched to my other breast, lavishing attention on it until I was panting, until my thighs were shaking where they bracketed his hips. I could feel myself getting closer, embarrassingly close, just from this... Just from dry humping him like a teenager while he sucked bruises into my skin.

"Lysander," I gasped, and he bit down gently, making me see stars.

He released my breast with a wet sound that should have been obscene but was somehow perfect. "I want to taste you," he said, his eyes meeting mine with dark intent. "I want to know if you're as sweet as you look."

My breath hitched. "Then do it."

He moved faster than I expected, flipping us so I was on my back with him kneeling between my legs. He pulled off his shirt, and for the first time, I had an unobstructed view of him. Broad shoulders, a defined chest, and abs that looked carved from stone. He was unfairly gorgeous, all hard lines and pale skin, and I wanted to run my hands over every inch of him.

I reached for the button of his trousers, but he caught my wrist. "Not yet," he said, his voice thick with restraint. "Let me. Please."

The please did me in. I nodded, letting my hand fall back to the bedding as he worked his magic, taking my underwear with them. I was bare before him, exposed and vulnerable, but the way he looked at me—like I was a feast and he'd been fasting for years—made me feel so fucking good.

I was partially covered in blood but he did not seem to care.

He spread my thighs wider and settled between them, his breath hot against my most sensitive skin. "Perfect," he whispered, and then his mouth was on me.

I nearly came off the bed.

His tongue dragged through my folds with long, slow strokes, like he was savoring me, learning my taste. He found my clit with unerring accuracy, circling it with the tip of his tongue before sucking it into his mouth, and my hands flew to his hair, gripping tight.

"Oh goddess," I panted, my hips bucking against his mouth. "Don't stop—please—"

He didn't. He doubled his efforts, his tongue working me with relentless precision while his hands gripped my thighs, holding me open for him. The pleasure was building fast, coiling tight in my belly, and I could feel myself getting wetter with every pass of his tongue. He moaned against me and the vibration sent shockwaves through my core, and I knew he was enjoying this... Enjoying making me fall apart.

He pushed one finger inside me, curling it to find that spot that made my vision blur, and I was lost. I came with a cry that was probably too loud, my whole body tensing as waves of pleasure crashed through me, and he kept licking me through it, drawing out every spasm until I was trembling and oversensitive.

When he finally lifted his head, his mouth was shining with my arousal, and the sight of it—prim, proper Lysander looking thoroughly debauched—sent another pulse of heat through me.

"You taste better than I imagined," he said, his voice rough. "I want to do that again. And again. Until you can't remember your name."

I sat up, my limbs still shaky, and reached for him. "My turn."

I pushed him back and climbed over him, my confidence returning now that I'd felt him, tasted his desire for me. I undid his trousers and freed him, and he was as beautiful there as he was everywhere else. He was thick, hard, and curving up toward his stomach, with the tip already wet with precum.

I wrapped my hand around him, and his hips jerked, a strangled sound escaping his throat. "Bonnie—"

"Shh," I said, and then I lowered my mouth to him.

He tasted like salt and skin, warm and distinctly masculine, and the sensation sent a shiver through me. I took him as deep as I could, and his hands found my hair again, not guiding me, just holding on as though I were his only anchor.

"Your mouth," he groaned, his hips shifting restlessly. "Fuck, your mouth..."

I used my hand where I couldn't reach with my lips, stroking him in time with my movements, and his breathing grew ragged, his grip on my hair tightening. I could feel him throbbing, could taste more of his arousal leaking onto my tongue, and I knew he was close.

"Wait," he gasped, pulling me off him with gentle insistence. "Wait, I want... I need to feel you. Like this."

He pulled me up his body until I was straddling him again, both of us flushed and breathless. He was still partially dressed, and the closeness between us sent another wave of heat through my body. His hands settled firmly on my hips as our bodies moved together, drawing a helpless moan from both of us. The intimacy of it made my toes curl, and for a moment, neither of us seemed capable of thinking about anything beyond the other.

"Like this," he repeated, his eyes locked on mine as he positioned himself so he was sliding against my clit with every movement. "Is this okay?"

"Yes," I breathed, and then I was moving, rocking against him, feeling the hard length of him brush against me with every roll of my hips. It was perfect, the friction exactly where I needed it, the sensation sending heat rushing through me. When I reached between us, my hand closed around him, and I stroked him in rhythm with my movements, drawing a low groan from his throat.

We found a rhythm together, messy and desperate and perfect. His hands were everywhere—on my breasts, my hips, my ass—pulling me closer, harder against him.

I could feel an orgasm building, slower and deeper this time, and from the way his jaw was clenched, the way his eyes had gone dark and unfocused, I knew he was close too.

"Bonnie," he panted, his thumb finding my clit and circling it in tight, firm strokes. "Come with me. Please... let me feel you..."

We were so close. So fucking close.

Then a loud knock shattered the moment completely.

"Your Majesty!" a voice called from the other side of the door. "There has been an attack in the infirmary."

To heal a Rogue

JOHANN

The knocking wouldn't stop.

I surfaced from sleep in pieces, dragged up through layers of exhaustion I hadn't earned honestly, and by the time I actually registered the sound as something real and not simply the last dregs of a bad dream, whoever stood on the other side of my door had already knocked six or seven times.

I looked at the clock on my nightstand. Four in the morning.

"This better be fucking good," I muttered, throwing the blanket off and stalking toward the door, already composing the exact tone I intended to use on whatever unfortunate sentinel or Omega had drawn the short straw so early today.

I yanked the door open, my mouth already forming the first syllable of a complaint sharp enough to leave a mark. Only for the words to die somewhere in my throat.

"Mother?"

She stood there in the dim corridor light, and for one disorienting second I genuinely wondered if I was still asleep, if this was simply my exhausted mind conjuring her out of guilt and worry. But she was solid when I reached for her, real as could be, thinner than I remembered, her frame smaller inside her coat than it had any right to be.

I pulled her into a hug before I'd fully decided to.

"How are you even here?" I demanded against her shoulder. "What about your health? You're supposed to be resting, not wandering around the estate at four in the morning."

She pulled back just enough to cup my face in both hands, her palms cool against my skin.

"Staying in that shack so far away wasn't going to save me, Johann," she said. "So I decided to spend whatever days I have left being useful to you. To our cause."

I studied her face properly then, and something in her eyes caught the low light strangely. Her eyes were red-rimmed and glassy.

"Have you been crying," I said, already stepping back to let her inside.

"Don't mind it."

"What do you mean, don't mind it." I closed the door behind her, my voice climbing despite myself. "Did someone say something to you? Do I need to handle it?"

"These are tears of joy," she said, settling onto the edge of my bed like she owned the room, which, in fairness, she practically did. "I've been so worried about the moves we needed to make. About the rogue situation specifically. But I imagine you'll hear soon enough that it's been handled."

My eyes went wide. "How the fuck would you have already handled that?"

"A miracle, perhaps." Her mouth curved into something almost serene. "Perhaps the heavens have finally decided to favor us."

I frowned, dropping into the chair across from her. "You told me not long ago we were cursed by the goddess herself. Now you're talking about heavens favoring us. Which is it?"

"Yes... Selene might stand against us," she said, folding her hands neatly in her lap. "But there are so many deities above this world, Johann. Perhaps one of them has finally decided to show a little kindness toward people who've suffered long enough."

"How exactly did you take care of the rogue," I said, leaning forward, "and are you certain none of it could be traced back to us? I can't afford another mess. Not after everything already sitting on my plate."

"No," she said, with a certainty that settled something jittery in my chest. "It won't trace back to either of us. I'm entirely sure of that."

"The person handling it," she continued, almost casual about it, "happens to be quite good at killing people, when he sets his mind to something."

"Who?" I asked. "Can they take out Lysander next? I'm sick of him breathing the same air as me. That bastard has some audacity."

She reached over and took my hand, her grip surprisingly firm for someone who looked like she might collapse if the wind shifted wrong.

"That wouldn't be wise," she said. "Your father's murder is already drawing enough scrutiny. Two assassination attempts on Lysander specifically would push suspicion directly onto our doorstep. He might even survive a third attempt, given how things have already gone." A shadow crossed her face at that, something I couldn't quite parse. "What I actually want, right now, is to restore your legitimacy. Kill every rumor currently circulating about you. That you're a bastard. That you had a hand in your own father's death."

"The first part will be simple enough to disprove," she said. "Soon, Bradley will ask you to submit to a DNA test. I need you to accept it without argument. Without hesitation."

I stared at her. "Wouldn't that be incredibly stupid? You told me yourself I'm half Lycan. That's exactly the kind of thing a test like that would reveal."

"Sure," I continued, my voice rising with the sheer absurdity of it, "I'm father's son by blood. But you said it plainly. I'm half Lycan too. Any competent test would expose that eventually. That has to be exactly why father decided to call me a bastard in the first place. He might have chosen to carry the truth about you as a Lycan to his grave rather than admit who he'd actually married. But he clearly thought this through carefully before he did it."

"Not entirely," my mother said, something almost amused in her tone now. "Right now, before your birthday arrives, any test you take will reveal you as a pure, royal-blooded wolf. No taint of Lycan visible at all. Not until the curse fully manifests, Johann. Until then, you have absolutely nothing to worry about." She squeezed my hand. "Which is precisely why I want Bradley to run the test now, before that changes. Once it's done and cleared, I can begin pushing the rest of our agenda properly."

"Lysander was clearly maneuvered into this position," she continued. "There's no possibility everyone in that court is simply swallowing his claim without question. People whisper. People doubt. This is too different and I believe that's something we can turn entirely to our advantage."

"How?" I queried.

"Everyone holds strong opinions about this family," she said. "About what we can do, what we can undo, what the goddess herself supposedly intends through us. And Lysander has been thrust directly into the public eye through every recent disaster. A healer from the age of legend, returned to the world, and somehow connected specifically to him, out of every royal-blooded man and woman in this kingdom. Why him? An assassination attempt survived through her power alone. All of it can be shaped. Made to feel theatrical. Made to suggest he was somehow destined for that seat all along, rather than simply handed it through a dying man's confused final wishes." Her eyes gleamed. "We only need to plant that seed carefully. I can manage that part myself."

"I promise you, son," she said, her voice softening, "you will get back everything that's been taken from you. Every tongue that dared lash out against your name will rot from the inside out for having done so. You will get all of it. And I intend to see this curse broken before I leave this world behind."

Something in her voice cracked slightly on that last part, and I felt my own throat tighten in response.

"You know," I said, quieter now, "I'd started to lose faith. Started feeling completely powerless in all of this." I let out a short, bitter laugh. "Even Amaranthine broke things off with me."

My mother's head snapped up, genuine shock replacing the calm composure she'd worn since walking through my door.

"What?"

"She broke it off," I said. "Apparently she's decided to pursue Lysander instead, now that he's sitting regent."

To heal a Rogue

JOHANN

My mother laughed. Loud, sudden, and utterly without warmth.

"That grimy, opportunistic family," she said, shaking her head slowly. "After everything I've done for them over the years. Every debt I quietly forgave, every favor I extended without a second thought." She wiped at her eye, still chuckling. "They'll be rudely awakened soon enough, when they realize Lysander isn't someone they can simply latch themselves onto now that it's convenient. That girl will never be seriously considered by him. He clearly already has his eyes set on someone else entirely."

"Really?" I said, leaning forward despite myself, some old, familiar curiosity flaring up. "Who?"

"You should see how he behaves around the healer," she said. "Even a blind man could see the hunger between them from across a room."

"What?" I said, sitting up straighter.

She waved a hand, dismissing the topic entirely, her attention clearly drifting somewhere else already, her eyes going distant and unfocused in a way I recognized from childhood, the particular look she wore whenever some new scheme was assembling itself behind her expression.

"What are you thinking about," I asked.

"It just clicked," she said.

"What did?"

"Forget Amaranthine for now," she said, waving a hand dismissively. "Once you have the throne properly secured, she'll come crawling back on her own, mark my words. For the moment, we push the narrative that you were the one who ended things with her. Not the other way around."

"Why does that matter," I said.

"There's a witch I'm going to introduce you to," she said, a slow, satisfied smile spreading across her face. "Willow. She's going to be your new fling."

I blinked at her. "What? I don't even know a witch named Willow."

"You will," my mother said, standing and smoothing down the front of her coat with the brisk efficiency of a woman already three steps ahead of the conversation we were currently having. "Soon enough."

"Mother, slow down," I said, standing too, though my legs still felt half asleep beneath me. "You're moving through about six different plans in the span of ten minutes. Amaranthine, the DNA test, some witch I've apparently never met who's now supposed to be my fling. Can you at least explain one thing properly before jumping to the next?"

She studied me for a moment, something almost fond crossing her tired face, the kind of look she used to give me as a boy whenever I'd asked her to slow down while she braided my hair or read to me too fast.

"Alright," she said, sitting back down. "Let's start with the witch, since that seems to have caught your attention the fastest."

"It has," I admitted.

"Her family, the Shelters, have served the royal house loyally for generations," my mother said. "Trusted implicitly by everyone who matters. If you're seen with her publicly, courting her properly, taking her to functions, letting the court witness genuine affection between you, it accomplishes two things at once. It buries the story of Amaranthine leaving you, replacing it with a narrative you control. And it ties you visibly to a bloodline nobody would ever suspect of scheming against the crown."

"That's actually clever," I said, grudging respect creeping into my voice.

"I have my moments," she said, something dry in her tone.

"But why her specifically," I said. "Out of every eligible woman in this kingdom?"

Something flickered across my mother's face, quick and calculating, gone before I could properly read it.

"Because I trust her," she said simply. "And because circumstances have made her rather... available, recently."

I narrowed my eyes at that phrasing, something in it not quite sitting right, but exhaustion and the sheer volume of information already dumped on me tonight kept me from pressing further.

"Fine," I said instead. "Introduce us. I'll play along."

"Good boy," she said, and the old childhood warmth in that phrase, despite everything, still managed to loosen something tight in my chest.

She stood again, straightening her coat a second time, though it hadn't wrinkled in the first place.

"Get some rest," she said. "You'll need your wits about you when Bradley comes for that blood sample. Show no hesitation. No fear. Let him see exactly the confident, wronged prince the court needs to start believing in again."

"And the rogue," I said, catching her hand before she could reach the door. "You're absolutely certain nothing connects back to us?"

"Absolutely," she said, and something in the flat certainty of her voice, the complete absence of doubt, should have comforted me more than it actually did.

"Trust me, Johann," she said, softer now, pressing a kiss to my forehead the way she used to when I was small enough to believe she could fix anything simply by wanting to badly enough. "I have never once stopped fighting for you. Not for a single day of your life. And I don't intend to start losing now, not when we're finally this close to everything we've worked toward."

She left then, her footsteps fading quickly down the corridor, and I stood alone in my room for a long while afterward, staring at the door, turning over everything she'd said, the shape of every plan she'd laid out in the span of a single conversation.

A witch named Willow. A blood test I apparently had nothing to fear from, for now. Amaranthine already forgotten, already recast as someone I'd discarded rather than someone who'd left me standing alone in a room surrounded by broken furniture.

And underneath all of it, quiet and persistent, the thought I couldn't quite shake loose no matter how hard I tried.

My cousin. My mate-obsessed, throne-stealing, insufferably self-righteous cousin.

In love with a healer who'd apparently seen fit to save his life not once, but twice now, in the span of a single night.

I climbed back into bed, though sleep felt impossibly far away now, my mind already turning over every possible way to use that particular piece of information against him, once the moment finally came to use it properly.

To heal a Rogue

LYSANDER

I was off her before the second knock finished landing, already reaching for my trousers on the floor.

"What happened?" I called through the door, my voice rougher than I wanted it to sound.

"It has to do with the private quarters of the rogue, Your Majesty," the sentinel said.
"There's been an attack there. We believe it has to do with a potential jailbreak."

I froze for half a second, the words landing strangely in my chest, before my hands resumed their frantic work, fingers fumbling over buttons, missing them, then going back to fix them.

Behind me, Bonnie pushed herself upright, the sheet slipping loosely around her body, her hair a tangled mess I knew I was responsible for. I turned to look at her before I could stop myself.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't want to—"

"Duty calls." There was something wry in Bonnie's voice, enough to tell me she wasn't actually annoyed, only as breathless as I still was. "Go."

"Don't sleep." I crossed to her and pressed a kiss to the top of her head, quick enough to be practical, though I let it linger a second longer than the moment called for. "I mean it."

"I heard you the first four times, and I don't think I am ready to die just yet."

The faint curve of her mouth made it clear she was enjoying my concern far more than she intended to admit.

I opened the door before I let myself look back again, because if I looked back again I wasn't sure I'd manage to leave at all.

The sentinel standing there startled slightly when my eyes landed on him, and behind him, further down the corridor, Delta was already approaching, alerted by the noise.

"Stay with her," I said to Delta, low, and she nodded once, already moving past the sentinel toward the door.

I fell into step beside the sentinel as he turned and started walking fast.

"Tell me everything," I said.

"I don't know much myself, Your Majesty," he said, his breath coming quick, whether from the walk or from nerves I couldn't tell. "From what we got off the sentinels on watch, they were attacked by a woman. She looked like she was a working healer. Had the dress and everything."

"More traitors," I said, something cold settling into my stomach.

"The second the sentinel force got word, we mobilized fully," he said. "Beta Bradley told me to come find you directly to inform you about what was happening as well."

We reached the corridor leading to the private wards, and the first thing I saw was a head, or what remained of one, sitting in a mess against the wall, blood arcing up in a pattern that made my stomach turn even after everything I'd already survived and already seen and done. It was violent for the pleasure of it.

I stepped past it into the main room and found Bradley standing in the center, furious in a way I hadn't seen from him yet, his jaw tight enough that I could see the muscle working from across the room. Four sentinels stood scattered around the space, weapons still drawn, eyes darting like they expected the walls themselves to attack next.

The bed where they'd chained the rogue sat empty. There was no body. No head, popped or otherwise. All that was in that space was an empty frame and restraints hanging loose where a man should have been.

"What the fuck happened?" I demanded.

"I'm not certain yet," Bradley replied, his voice tight and controlled in the way of a man holding himself together through sheer will. "We thought we had the bastard secured. By the time I arrived, both the infiltrator and the rogue were gone entirely. This was calculated, Your Majesty. I can't believe they actually succeeded."

"It's not your fault," I said, though the words came out flatter than I meant them to, my mind already racing ahead toward every possible explanation.

"What did the infiltrator look like? And can you at least get them? The sentinel who told me what happened told me they are believed to be a healer."

"I've already sent sentinels to pull the security records," Bradley said. "They should be back any moment now, along with a healer familiar with most of the staff faces around here, and that delicate I told you I would hire is on her way as well. We'll find something."

"I do find it interesting," He continued, "that we're attacked the same night an old face returns home."

My eyes cut to him sharply. "You warned me about drawing conclusions without evidence."

"I did," he said. "I'm simply noting the timing."

"Well, we still need evidence."

"Oh, I'll find this one," he said, something dark and certain settling into his voice. "I know I have them cornered already. The Queen wants a DNA test for her son. If she wants the truth about his parentage to come out publicly, that's fine by me. And if by some miracle he does turn out to be the late King's blood, then there has to be another reason entirely for why Cornelius lied to you and me the way he did. A delicate will find that answer regardless since we will have something precious of the Prince in our hands. His blood."

A sentinel came jogging in at that moment, sweat darkening the collar of his uniform, a tablet clutched tightly in both hands. A healer hurried after him, visibly shaken, her face pale and her eyes too wide, as though she were still trying to process whatever violence she had witnessed on the way here.

"I found something." The sentinel struggled to catch his breath as he held the tablet out toward Bradley.

Bradley took it, and I moved to his shoulder, watching the footage with him.

A woman in a healer's uniform appeared on the screen, walking calmly down the corridor. There was nothing hurried about her movements. If anything, she looked almost leisurely.

Then she glanced up.

Straight at the camera.

She raised one hand in a small, lazy wave, almost as though she were saying hello.

The feed immediately scrambled.

Static tore across the screen, swallowing the image in a violent burst before the display went completely black.

"The camera was fried when I checked it in person," the sentinel explained. "The whole thing melted from the inside. Wires and everything."

"Magic." Bradley's voice dropped. "It has to be."

He then turned toward the healer standing behind the sentinel, who was still trembling, her arms wrapped tightly around herself.

"Do you recognize this woman?"

He held the tablet out to her.

The healer's entire body seemed to fold inward. Her breath caught sharply, and her eyes locked onto the frozen image.

"This cannot be the case." Her voice cracked. "She's one of our own. She's good. She's not a killer."

Bradley's expression remained hard.

"So you know her? That is what I am getting."

The healer said nothing. Her gaze flicked between the woman on the tablet and the people surrounding her, as though searching for some way out of the answer she already knew she had to give.

"Give me a name."

Bradley's voice dropped, quiet enough to be more threatening than a shout.

"Now."

Chapter 88: I know you

FIA

The crying started before the knock did, small and hiccuping through the door. I was already sitting up by the time the soft rap finally came against the wood.

I heard someone shushing her on the other side, their voice low and gentle. "It's fine. Don't wake them up."

I reached the door before they could finish and opened it to find Muna standing there in her nightgown, cheeks blotchy from crying. An Omega hovered behind her, wearing the particular expression of someone who had already apologized several times in her head before I even appeared.

"I'm so sorry for disturbing you, Luna," she said, bowing quickly. "The young mistress was inconsolable."

"I know," I said. "You can go tend to Wyatt now. I've got her."

I scooped Muna into my arms, and her little arms immediately locked around my neck as I carried her back into the room.

"What happened, baby?" I asked, settling her against my hip.

"Bad dream," she mumbled, her voice still thick with tears.

"Is it the one with the painting again?" I asked. "The one where you fall into it?"

She nodded against my shoulder.

I pressed a kiss into her hair. "It's just a dream, baby. But you can stay here tonight if you want."

Behind me, Cian shifted against the headboard, sitting up with a groggy grunt. His voice was rough with sleep when he spoke.

"I don't know about that. Wyatt's going to notice his sister isn't coming back and come running. He can't stand being left alone in a room, not since he found out his sister gets special treatment."

True to his word, another small knock sounded on the door before I had even finished settling Muna beneath the blankets.

I sighed, then walked over and opened it.

Wyatt stood on the other side, his hair sticking up in every direction, the same Omega behind him wearing an expression that practically begged forgiveness before I had said a word.

"I thought you told me you weren't afraid of the dark, Wyatt," I said, bending down until we were eye to eye, one eyebrow raised.

"I'm not," he insisted, his little face twisting with indignation. "I was just worried about Muna."

Of course he was.

I stepped aside and let him in.

Wyatt immediately made a beeline for his father, climbing into Cian's lap without ceremony. Cian caught him easily and settled him against his chest, one arm curling around his small body like it was the most natural thing in the world.

For us, it had become exactly that.

I returned to the bed and laid Muna properly in the middle, smoothing her hair away from her damp cheeks. I stroked it slowly, watching her eyelids grow heavier with every pass of my hand.

When her breathing finally evened out, the last little hitch of her sobs fading into sleep, I let myself reach for the gift I rarely used on my own children.

I wanted to take a peek into her future, as I had done sparingly before. But nothing came.

It had been that way from the very first time I tried, back when she was still an infant, small enough to fit comfortably in one arm. Even with Wyatt, all I had ever managed to catch were fragments, brief and disjointed images that never quite assembled into anything coherent.

But with Muna, there was nothing at all.

Only a wall where a window should have been.

That was what worried me most.

The dream she kept having was always the same, night after night. She was falling into some painting, though she could never describe the painting properly when she woke. She was only one, so perhaps that was all it was, a nightmare born from a child's imagination. Or perhaps it was something else entirely.

A warning trying to reach her.

A glimpse of something she wasn't old enough to understand.

Or maybe she had inherited the same gift I carried, and it simply hadn't found its proper shape yet.

I couldn't tell which possibility unsettled me more.

Cian must have noticed the change in my expression because his hand found mine beneath the blanket, his fingers curling gently around it.

"It's fine," he said quietly. "I don't think anything is wrong with her."

"Maybe not right now," I murmured. "But it doesn't help that I can't see anything for her. Not even a glimpse."

"Please," Cian said, his thumb brushing over the back of my hand. "Focus on the present. I don't love that you can call on that particular gift at will these days. It only gives you another reason to worry about things that haven't happened yet, and might never happen at all."

"My mother's worry kept me safe," I said.

My gaze dropped to Muna.

"It gave me the chance to actually be happy eventually. I want the same thing for our children. So not seeing anything for Muna, not even a flicker, worries me more than you know."

"It's fine," he repeated, softer this time. "Get your mind off it for tonight, at least."

I looked down at Muna.

She was fully asleep now, her small face relaxed and peaceful, so far removed from the terror she'd described that it was almost easy to believe the dream had been nothing more than a child's nightmare.

Almost.

Beside her, Wyatt had drifted off against his father's chest, one small fist still loosely gripping the fabric of Cian's shirt.

I forced myself to look away.

If I couldn't see the future, there was no point torturing myself over what I couldn't know.

To distract myself, I reached for my phone on the nightstand and found a message waiting from Lysander.

"Oh..." I murmured, mostly to fill the quiet. "He's texted."

"Who?" Cian asked, continuing to stroke Wyatt's hair.

"Lysander."

He made no attempt to hide his reaction to that.

"You two still keep in touch?" Cian asked, though it wasn't really a question.

"He's our children's godfather," I said. "Of course we do."

"I never actually agreed to that title, if I recall correctly."

"You didn't have to. It's nice having the royal family in our corner," I said, unable to keep the smile from my face.

"I don't know about that."

"What did he say?" Cian asked, nodding toward the phone still glowing in my hand.

"He needs my help," I said, reading the message again. "With the newly discovered healer."

Cian straightened properly now, careful not to jostle Wyatt where he slept against his chest.

"I don't like that."

"Why?" I asked. "Jealous?"

"I might be," he admitted. "But that has very little to do with why I don't like it."

I laughed quietly at his honesty, keeping my voice low enough not to disturb either child.

"Fair enough. What's your actual reason, then?"

"The secret's out now," he said. "I used to think you were some rare, once-in-a-lifetime occurrence. But it seems healers from the age of legend are slowly finding their way back into this world. Maybe the goddess's heart is softening toward us again. Who knows? But goddess only knows what our own kind will do to get their hands on someone like that. It could end up far worse than what happened before, historically speaking."

"I'll be fine," I said. "I promise. I'm more than capable of handling myself, and Skollrend isn't exactly a pack anyone wants to test. The royal family will be there as opposition as well."

I crossed the room and leaned down to press a kiss to his forehead.

"It's nice having someone out there who's just like me. I don't think this girl understands much about what she actually is yet. I can help her with that."

"I still don't like it," he admitted. "But I understand."

He tilted his head up and kissed me properly, brief but warm.

"On the bright side," he murmured against my lips, "it'll give you something else to think about besides Muna's future."

I laughed softly at that, though the worry hadn't actually left me. It had only retreated to the quiet corner of my mind where it always seemed to live these days, waiting patiently for another reason to remind me it was still there.

Chapter 89: F the caste

LYSANDER

"Rosalind Thackery," the healer finally breathed, her voice barely audible, as though speaking the name aloud might somehow summon the woman herself. "She's one of the junior healers. Or she was. I don't understand how she could have—"

Bradley silenced her with a raised hand before turning toward the nearest sentinel.

"Bring the girl here. Now."

Two sentinels immediately broke away, their boots striking hard against the floor as they vanished down the corridor. The healer who told scurried away behind them.

Bradley stepped out and his gaze swept across the ruined space, taking in the blood drying dark against the wall and looking back into the room occasionally to the empty frame where a man should have been chained.

"I don't like that this house is being made fools of by vipers," he muttered, his voice low and clipped. "I hadn't realized how deep the rot had spread. The witches and dragon shifters will have a field day with this once word gets out. A royal house that can't even

secure a single prisoner. What the fuck was I made for if I cannot be a competent Beta? It almost makes me want to... commit treason."

I cleared my throat, ignoring that. "I want to talk about something."

Bradley turned toward me fully. "Of course. I'm your subject. My ears are yours."

"The man in the tube."

He went still.

It was subtle, no more than a slight stiffening through his shoulders, but I caught it.

"I think it's fine to discuss," I continued. "The man in the tube could mean anything to anyone listening right now."

"What about him, Your Majesty?"

"Again, this is only a gut feeling, but I think the person who attacked my mate—"

Bradley's eyes widened at the word, and I realized a heartbeat too late what I'd let slip.

"Mate?"

"It was going to come out eventually," I admitted. "Yes. The goddess handed me a match of fate. The healer is my mate."

Bradley snapped his fingers, realization settling into place behind his eyes.

"That explains it. I did wonder why she saved you the way she did. So publicly. My working theory was that she was trying to position herself favorably, currying goodwill in case things went even badly for her later. But the math never quite balanced, not if I was being honest with myself about her as a schemer. Now it makes far more sense. She simply acted without thinking it through."

I raised an eyebrow at that but let it pass.

"Back to what I was saying," I continued. "I suspect it was him. The man in the tube. The one who attacked her."

"That cannot be," Bradley replied flatly. "He's contained."

"He's also a direct descendant of the deity we serve," I countered, lowering my voice. "Who knows what limits actually apply to something like that."

"Then why would he start now, of all times?" Bradley pressed. "Taking you out would have been the far more strategic move."

I turned that over. He had a point, but I had one of my own.

"Unlike the rest of us, Bonnie is special," I said. "You saw her stitch a bullet hole shut in my neck with nothing but sheer will. Maybe he can reach her on a level the rest of us aren't accessible on."

"That's a theory."

"Maybe," I conceded. "But the witch said something similar before she collapsed and after she roused even. Whoever attacked Bonnie was old. Genuinely old. Those were her words. And Bonnie also told me she was pulled into the person's memories during the attack. She saw them being cursed."

I watched Bradley's expression carefully.

"Does any of that ring a bell for you?"

He fell silent, visibly working through the implications.

"But why would he play games through dreams instead of simply freeing himself?" Bradley finally asked. "If he had that kind of reach."

"I don't know," I admitted.

"I do think I will get the legacy witch houses that helped us together one more time to chack the runes. But for now, we need to be grounded in reality. I believe all of this... everything keeps pointing back toward the people we already suspect."

Johann and Edelina.

He continued. "The only reason they haven't faced the Elder Circle for treason is because we lack proof. We'll get it eventually. And when we do, they'll answer for it."

A sentinel came sprinting down the corridor before Bradley could respond, breathless, something folded tightly in his hand.

"We found the healer," he reported. "In her quarters."

"And?"

"She'd taken her own life," the sentinel revealed. "There was a letter left behind."

"What letter," I said, already crossing the room.

He held it out, and I took it, unfolding the paper with hands that weren't entirely steady.

The paper was cheap, the kind stocked in bulk for junior staff, and her handwriting slanted hard to the right, rushed in places where the pen had nearly torn through.

I do not regret what I have done tonight. I regret only that it took me this long to understand what needed doing.

I was not born into a healer household. I was born an Omega. A Low caste. My mother scrubbed floors in this very estate for forty years and died with nothing to show for it but bad knees and a title that meant she could be worked to death and thanked for the privilege. I trained twice as hard as any born high caste to earn a place as a low ranking healer in this infirmary, and I still get spoken over in rooms where my opinion should matter more than anyone else's. That is the caste system working exactly as it was designed to work.

Why should how you are born determine how you are allowed to live? Why does a wolf's blood, something none of us chose, decide who kneels and who gets knelt to? I used to believe things would change slowly, through patience, through proving ourselves useful enough that they would have no choice but to see us. I was wrong. Nothing changes on its own. You can be the most useful person in a room and still be treated as lesser, because usefulness was never the actual measure. Blood was. It always has been.

The rogues understand something the rest of us were too frightened to admit. They are showing the rest of us the light, even if the werewolf world insists on calling it darkness. I am not ashamed of what I did tonight. I am only sorry I could not do more before this letter is found.

The royal house is not safe anymore. Not from us. We are the alliance against rank, and we are not confined to some rogue camp outside the pack lines. We are inside these walls already. We serve your food. We clean your linens. We heal your wounds and hold our tongues while you decide our worth based on nothing we ever had a hand in choosing. You should be afraid of exactly that. Not the rogues outside your gates. The ones already standing beside you.

If the throne falls, understand that it falls because it was built on a foundation that was always going to crack. We did not create the fault line. We are only the ones brave enough to finally strike it.

If you royals fall, know that it all falls. Every crown built on someone else's back eventually collapses under its own weight.

I am not sorry.

Chapter 90: Delicate affairs 1

LYSANDER

I handed the letter to Bradley when I finished.

He read it without a word, his eyes moving steadily from one line to the next. When he reached the end, he folded the paper along its existing crease and gave a short, humorless laugh.

"So we have traitors within," he murmured. "How wonderfully convenient for us."

"I want to see the body."

The sentinel turned and led us down the corridor. I followed, then glanced back at another sentinel trailing behind us. The bodies of the men killed in the hall were still being gathered.

"Treat them with respect," I called. "They fought for the crown. They don't deserve to be handled like evidence or dead meat."

The sentinel straightened and inclined his head.

"Yes, sir."

We moved on.

The quarters were tucked into a narrow section of the estate, several small rooms crowded together beneath the same aging space. Her door stood open on the left.

I slowed.

The room was small and painfully ordinary. A narrow bed. A washbasin. A wooden chest pushed against the wall.

And her.

A length of rope disappeared around an old ceiling beam, the other end knotted tightly around her neck. Her body hung several feet above the floor, turning almost imperceptibly in the stale air. Her bare feet were still.

I looked away.

"That is what rogue scum deserves." Bradley's voice held none of the hesitation I felt.

"She wasn't a rogue." I retorted and I was sure if it too.

His gaze remained fixed on the body.

"We just read her letter."

"Exactly." I kept my eyes on the floorboards. "Look at what we're being given, Bradley. Sentinels slaughtered in the hall, their heads blown apart. A killer who walks straight out before anyone can find them even when you were sure you had them cornered. Now we find one of our own hanging in her room with a letter conveniently confessing to everything."

Bradley's expression tightened.

"The wounds in that hall weren't made by an ordinary rogue."

"No."

I finally looked toward the body again, but only for a moment.

"Whoever did this wanted us to find it. They wanted us frightened enough to stop asking questions and start going rabid."

Bradley folded his arms. "And what are you suggesting?"

"That we're being led."

His eyes narrowed at that.

"What was used in that side of the infirmary was magic and the kind of magic used in that hall wasn't brute force. It was precise.... controlled. Whoever killed those sentinels knew exactly what they were doing."

I nodded toward the now dead healer without looking directly at her.

"She'd been here for years. Worked among us. Healed our soldiers. Ate at our tables. If she could use magic like that, someone would have noticed. And I am certain there isn't a single record of her being a magic user in the system."

Bradley's jaw shifted.

I continued before he could answer.

"Someone took a fear and the minor hate we've already been taught to have, wrapped it around a dead woman, and left her where we'd be certain to find her. Now all they have to do is wait for us to start tearing through our own walls looking for 'inside' rogues."

Silence settled between us.

Bradley stared at the body for several seconds. His fingers flexed once at his side.

"Fuck... You're right and it was already working on me."

The admission came reluctantly and with that seemed to come his theories.

"A magic user could wear anyone's face."

He looked toward me then, something colder entering his expression.

"That opens rather a lot of doors we hadn't considered."

"These bastards."

His hand dragged over his jaw.

"You'd think," I said, "given how thoroughly this estate is supposed to be warded, that someone walking around in a stolen face and agenda would trigger something."

Bradley gave a faint, weary shake of his head.

"That's not quite how the wards work."

He stepped farther into the room, his eyes moving over the walls as though he might find the answer hidden in the stone.

"Most of the wards we have don't judge appearances. They judge intent, presence, power. And you know with witches, their magic is usually built around a hierarchy of authority."

I frowned.

"So a disguise wouldn't matter?"

"Not necessarily."

He tapped two fingers against his arm.

"If someone walked through those gates wearing another person's face, it wouldn't give two shits. It could sense intent of course but I have learned even that can be skewed. If someone genuinely believed they belonged here, the wards might recognize the belief more than they recognized the deception. They are old too. The witches of this age do not have as much control and knowledge about warding runes like the old ones."

I stared at him.

"That might be the issue. The allergy to change with most of our institutions. Magic is hierarchical. What if they're powerful enough to trump those wards?"

"Then we'd have an even bigger problem."

His gaze returned to the doorway and I let out a slow breath. "That's comforting."

Bradley glanced at me. "I never claimed it would be."

I looked back toward the body once more, forcing myself this time.

"This Omega shouldn't be made into a villain, Bradley," I said. "Even if the elders decide it's cleaner to explain it away that way, to protect the royal family's reputation, to protect the standing of this house. She served this royal house faithfully for years. She died a horrible, senseless death tonight, used as a puppet by whoever's actually behind all of this. She deserves to be buried without rumors trailing after her name, and after her family's name."

"That's a generous position, Your Majesty."

"It's the correct one."

A sentinel approached and bowed low. "The Delicate has arrived, High Beta."

"Bring her in," Bradley said. "Let's see what she can tell us."

The sentinel left, and Bradley turned back to me.

"I'll keep your word on this," he said. "About the healer's reputation. That matters more than anything else right now, given everything else currently unraveling around us."

"Thank you."

The Delicate entered a moment later.

I recognized the shape of her presentation immediately, though the details had changed since the last one I'd encountered as a boy. She was covered from throat to ankle in dark fabric, gloves sealed tightly at the wrists, every inch of skin concealed except for the narrow strip visible around her eyes.

There was no handler.

That caught my attention.

"Where is your handler?"

She raised both hands to the covering around her head and slowly unwound it. Pale skin emerged first, almost translucent beneath the lamplight, followed by a face that was sharper and more severe than I'd expected. Her eyes were the strangest part. They were so dark they appeared almost entirely black, the iris barely distinguishable from the pupil.

"I work alone, Your Majesty."

She didn't offer an explanation, and something about the certainty in her voice told me she didn't intend to.

I gestured toward the adjoining room, where the healer's body still hung from the ceiling beam.

"We have two tasks for you. This is the first. We believe this woman was pushed toward taking her own life. We need to know exactly what happened here."

The Delicate's gaze shifted toward the doorway.

She studied the room for a moment before giving a single nod.

"Of course."

She stepped inside.

The change in her was subtle. Whatever she had been before crossing that threshold seemed to fall away. Her shoulders settled, her breathing slowed, and her attention narrowed until there was nothing left of her but observation.

She peeled one glove from her hand and flexed her bare fingers.

Then she began to touch the room.

Her fingertips skimmed the doorframe first, lingering against the wood. She moved to the wall, tracing a slow line across its surface before brushing the edge of the nearby table. She didn't appear to be searching for anything in particular.

Or perhaps she was searching for something I couldn't see.

She stopped beside the bed.

Her fingers hovered above the blanket without quite touching it.

"Have you found anything?" I asked.

She didn't answer immediately.

Her dark eyes remained fixed on the room, and when she finally spoke, her voice had dropped almost to a whisper.

"I am tasting the fragments of what she left behind."

I glanced at Bradley.

He was watching her just as carefully as I was.

The Delicate crouched beside the bed and pressed her palm against the floorboards.

For several seconds, nothing happened.

Then her fingers tightened.

Her expression changed. Only slightly. But I saw it.

She had found something.

"She was very hardworking," the Delicate said, her voice distant, half somewhere else entirely. "She loved what she did. She was hoping to transcend her junior standing soon enough. She'd been saving for it. Extra shifts. Cozying to the big guns at the infirmary."

She paused, her hand stilling in the air, and looked up at the hanging body properly for the first time.

She whispered something too quiet for me to catch, a prayer, maybe, in some old dialect I didn't recognize, and then reached out and pressed her bare palm against the dead woman's leg.