

To heal a Rogue

c 91-100

Chapter 91: Delicate affairs 2

LYSANDER

The Delicate's eyes rolled white the moment her palm made full contact with the dead woman's leg.

A sharp, involuntary gasp tore from her throat.

"She suffered," Her voice had changed. The words came thin and strained, as though she were speaking through someone else's pain. "She didn't want to die. She fought it, in her own mind. But something in her had already stopped listening to her. She had to obey."

Tears slipped down her cheeks.

At first, they were ordinary tears, clear against her pale skin. Then her shoulders began to tremble, the movement spreading through her arms until her entire body shook beneath the dark fabric.

"What else?" I stepped closer. "Who did it?"

"She was heading back after her shift."

Her eyes remained rolled back, showing nothing but white.

"She was tired. Thinking about her bed. Thinking about sleep."

Her fingers twitched against the dead woman's leg.

"Then she was stopped."

"By who?"

"I'm close," Her breathing hitched. "I'm close."

Then she went completely still.

Every muscle in her body locked at once. Her arm remained rigid, her hand pressed against the dead woman's leg, while tears continued to slip silently from the corners of her eyes.

I took another step toward her. "Well?"

But she stopped answering. In fact, she now looked frozen.

The next tear that escaped was red. I watched it crawl down her cheek.

Another followed. Then another.

I was certain my eyes were deceiving me. So I blinked. But I was indeed seeing this.

It was indeed red.

Thick drops of crimson gathered beneath her jaw before falling onto the floorboards with soft, wet taps.

I turned toward Bradley, wondering if he was seeing what I was now seeing.

He has this shocked look on his face and he wasted no time at all.

He started moving.

"Girl," His voice sharpened. "Are you all right? Maybe you should stop."

He caught her wrist and tried to pull her hand away from the dead healer's cold leg.

Nothing happened.

Her fingers remained locked against the dead woman's leg.

Bradley pulled even harder, but the Delicate's arm didn't bend. Her fingers didn't loosen either.

It was as though something had fused her hand to the corpse.

"Let go," Bradley ordered.

Her head turned. Slowly.

Her white eyes found me.

There was something unsettling about looking at eyes with nothing but whites in them.

Nothing in those eyes should have allowed her to see me at all, yet her gaze settled directly on mine.

"I shouldn't have looked." Her voice cracked. "I don't think they liked me looking."

I felt the room change. The air seemed to contract around us.

Then, to everyone's surprise, her eyes caught fire.

White flame erupted from both sockets and she shrieked in pure horror.

The sound ripped through the room and spilled into the corridor, followed almost immediately by shouts from the sentinels outside.

Bradley recoiled.

The Delicate's hand finally tore free from the dead woman's leg.

Both hands flew to her face.

She clawed desperately at her burning eyes, nails scraping against her own skin as though she could somehow tear the fire from her skull.

"Get her back!" Bradley shouted.

I barely heard him.

I couldn't look away.

The flames weren't spreading.

They weren't consuming her face.

They were burning from somewhere behind her eyes.

I had seen this before.

The thought surfaced through the noise, sudden and unwelcome.

When? Where?

"Your Majesty!" Bradley's shout broke through the fragments circling my mind. "Get away from her!"

I couldn't.

"Get her down!" I yelled instead.

I was already moving too.

The Delicate's knees buckled, and I lunged forward, but Bradley reached her first. He dropped to his knees and caught her before her skull struck the floor, then seized both her wrists and dragged her hands away from her face.

He swore seeing the sight. "Selene!"

"Hold her," I ordered.

Her fingers still twitched, trying to claw their way back toward her eyes even though she was already slipping into unconsciousness.

"Someone get water!" My voice cracked with urgency, and I didn't care. "Now!"

It was that moment that the white flames guttered out.

One moment they were blazing from her sockets, filling the room with that impossible light. The next, there was nothing. Only a thin curl of smoke rising from the edges of her eyes remained.

Her body went slack in Bradley's arms.

I stood over her, breathing hard.

The dead healer still hung above us, swaying faintly from the ceiling beam. Beneath her, the Delicate lay unconscious on the floor, her pale face streaked with red tears, half empty eye sockets and smoke.

Something cold settled beneath my ribs.

Whatever we were dealing with didn't want to be found.

It didn't merely hide its tracks. It destroyed anyone who came close enough to uncover them.

I'd seen something like this before. With the witch.

The memory surfaced more clearly now.

Her eyes...

The fire in them...

The way she'd been punished the moment she reached something she wasn't supposed to see.

Only this was worse. Much worse.

I stared at the Delicate. And then I remembered.

Not the witch. Something before her.

Something I'd seen long before I understood plenty about the world.

My breath caught. I had seen this before.

I knew exactly when. And I knew where.

The room dissolved around me, the walls and the blood and the Delicate's slack body folding away into something older, softer at the edges the way memory always was.

I was younger and Uncle Cornelius was crouched in front of me, his hands braced on his knees, his face carrying none of the formal distance he usually wore in front of the people.

"I believe you, son," he said. "Your father told me everything. About the girl in the woods. And I've brought someone who can help us understand what happened to you out there. What you saw."

"Who, Uncle?"

"A Delicate," he said. "Since that scrap of rag still has this strange girl's blood on it, she should be able to tell us a great deal about who this girl actually is."

He rose and crossed to the door, pulling it open. "You may come in."

A woman entered first. She wore gloves on both hands and dressed with a plainness that made her nearly forgettable. She was the epitome of the kind of woman built to be overlooked in any room she stood in. Behind her, a man followed, taller, and quiet looking. His eyes swept the room once before settling on nothing in particular.

"Who's he," I asked.

"Her handler," Cornelius said. "You'd call them business partners, I suppose."

I nodded, though the word meant little to me at that time.

"May I have the item," the Delicate asked, her voice soft and measured.

I got up from the bed and crossed to the wooden chest against the wall, digging into it until my fingers found the small scrap of fabric I'd hidden there. Rusted blood stained one corner of it, dark and old by then, though at the time it had still felt fresh enough to make my stomach turn every time I looked at it.

I handed it over.

She took it in her gloved hand first, turning it over once, before peeling the second glove free and pressing her bare fingers directly against the stained fabric.

She gasped.

That wasn't all too. Fire caught in her eye sockets almost instantly, white and blinding, the same impossible light I'd just watched consume another Delicate decades later in a room stinking of blood and suffering. I remembered screaming. I remembered my uncle grabbing me, pulling me back against his chest, his hand covering my eyes so I wouldn't have to watch whatever came next.

The memory snapped shut, and I was back in the present, staring down at the unconscious woman in Bradley's arms, smoke still curling faint from her ruined eyes.

The girl in the meadows... That had been Fia.

And I knew what Fia was.

From every conversation we'd had since, from the careful way she always spoke about her own abilities, there had been some kind of protection built around healers specifically. Some... ward meant to keep exactly this from happening to anyone who tried digging too deep into what one of them actually was.

My chest went tight.

Was the attacker a healer? A rogue healer, powerful enough, old enough, to trigger that same defense mechanism in anyone foolish enough to try tracing them?

To heal a Rogue

BONNIE

Delta walked in with a look on her face that I did not trust one bit.

"What?" I demanded, my cheek heating as memories of his kiss, his touch, and that wicked tongue came rushing back.

"Nothing."

The way she delivered it made it painfully obvious that it was anything but nothing.

"You're doing the thing."

"What thing? I'm not doing anything."

"The face." I narrowed my eyes at her. "You know exactly what happened, and you're waiting for me to admit it. But I'm not giving you the satisfaction."

As if to reinforce my point, I tugged the blanket higher, covering my breasts.

Delta pressed her lips together, valiantly attempting to contain her smile. She failed.

"Well?" Her eyebrows rose. "Did something happen?"

"Ew. No." I looked away. "Nothing really happened. Another royal drama just had to come along and ruin the moment."

Gosh, it actually hurt admitting that out loud.

So I changed the subject before she could make me regret it.

"Do you know much about what happened?"

"Yes."

"Oh." I turned back to her. "Then you have to tell me."

"There isn't much to tell." The glint in her eyes suggested she was enjoying this far too much. "The rogue who tried to kill you, before Alpha Lysander put his own life on the line, was being treated in the royal infirmary. From what I heard, he's most likely escaped."

My amusement disappeared.

I sat up straighter. "Escaped?"

She nodded. "Yeah... those rogues are moving overtime."

"So there are spies inside the royal house."

"It would seem that way."

"That actually makes sense." I drew my knees toward my chest, wrapping my arms around them as an uneasy feeling settled in my stomach. "Considering how the King was killed, and how easily a rogue managed to infiltrate the estate when I was supposed to be publicly shamed and painted as the killer of the late King."

The more I thought about it, the worse it felt.

"I worry about the lesser caste now. There's going to be hate. Hostility. Fear does that to people."

"It's the way of the world." Delta settled onto the edge of the bed. "Everyone has goals. Desires. And when they can't achieve them honestly, it turns some people into monsters."

She paused, her expression briefly darkening.

"I'd know."

I glanced at her, but before I could ask what she meant, she continued.

"But I'm sure Alpha Lysander will figure this out. It might even help with how the lower caste sees him."

I snorted. "You glaze him a lot, you know that?"

"He's put in the work." She didn't even blink. "Like I said, you should see Lily of the Valley. So my glaze is valid."

I laughed.

"I'm sure he'll manage here too." she added.

"Well," I stretched my arms above my head, "I definitely have to see Lily of the Valley for myself now."

I got to my feet, my joints protesting after the long day and even longer night.

"I'm going to take a bath."

"I'll help set the temperature." Delta was already moving. "Is there one you prefer?"

"It's just water." I waved her off. "I can manage that myself."

"You're my mistress." She said it as though that settled the matter completely. "Alpha Lysander put you in my charge. It's my job to keep you comfortable enough to stay awake until the danger is averted."

I laughed. "I appreciate that. Truly. But I wasn't raised with luxury or comfort, and I don't think I'll adjust easily to having someone else run my bath for me."

I glanced toward the bathroom.

"I like doing simple things myself. It's one of the few things that still feels like mine. It gives autonomy in a world where I don't usually feel like I have a lot."

Something in her expression softened.

"I'm glad you're here," I added. "I have a feeling we could actually become friends. But I don't want a slave, Delta. Or a servant. I've never been comfortable with how brutal this caste system can be to people. Our people."

She nodded slowly, understanding passing through her eyes.

"Duly noted." She sat back at the edge of the bed. "I'll be right here if you need anything."

I stepped into the bathroom and turned on the shower, twisting the handle all the way toward cold before placing my hand beneath the stream.

The water was icy.

It didn't bother me.

I had gone without warm water for most of my life, and the shock against my skin felt almost grounding after everything the night had thrown at me. It was something familiar. Something simple. Something I understood.

After a moment, I shut the water off and crossed to the sink.

A new toothbrush sat on the counter, still sealed in its packaging.

Lysander's doing, obviously.

He really was moving fast to make sure I had everything I needed.

I tore open the package and brushed my teeth quickly before stepping back into the shower.

My hand reached for the bottles lined up along the shelf.

There was a feminine wash first. I picked it up, unscrewed the cap, and gave it a quick sniff.

It was floral. Super light and pleasant.

Then my eyes drifted to the masculine bottle beside it.

I hesitated before picking that one up too.

The moment I smelled it, I knew.

Lysander.

It was the exact scent that clung to him, layered beneath his own naturally sweet scent.

Something low and deeply inconvenient twisted in my chest.

I immediately put the bottle back.

"Weird," I muttered to myself.

Then I grabbed the feminine wash instead, working it through my hair and over my skin beneath the cold spray, determined to think about absolutely anything other than him.

I wrapped a towel around myself once I was finished and stepped back into the room to find Delta already hard at work.

The windows had been thrown open, morning light spilling across the room in warm gold as the sun began its climb. Delta held up a dress, pink and delicate, giving it a little shake to smooth out the wrinkles.

"It's a little wrinkled," she remarked. "I'll find out where I can get a steamer."

I walked over and looked at it. "It's not bad. I just don't know if I should wear it."

My gaze drifted toward the covered photo frame on the wall, the one still hidden beneath its dark cloth.

"This is his mother's room," I murmured. "I don't know if he'd want me wearing something that belonged to her."

To heal a Rogue

BONNIE

"It's just a dress." Delta shrugged. "I don't think he'd mind."

I wasn't so sure.

There was something tender and unresolved about Lysander's mother, something I didn't want to accidentally disturb by putting on the wrong dress.

"I used to stay in the retainer's quarters," I reminded her. "I still have clothes there."

"Male clothes?"

"I don't think it matters." I gestured toward myself. "I'll be dressed either way."

Delta crossed her arms and gave me a look.

"You're going to be a queen, Mistress."

That made me uncomfortable instantly. "Please, can you just call me Bonnie?"

She nodded.

"You're going to be a queen, Bonnie." She repeated. "You need to start looking and feeling the part."

She lifted the dress again. "And I know for a fact Alpha Lysander wouldn't care one bit if you wore this."

She paused, her mouth curving.

"Would he even remember it belonged to his mother? He's a man. Men remember three things total."

A laugh escaped me before I could stop it.

I glanced back at the dress.

The ruined scanty gown I had been wearing earlier was probably still lying somewhere, soaked through with my own blood and Lysander's and most likely unwearable now. Compared to that, there really wasn't anything so terrible about a pink dress.

"Fine."

Delta's entire face brightened.

She immediately began smoothing the fabric properly, looking far too pleased with herself.

I dried myself the rest of the way, running the towel through my damp hair as I watched her fuss over the dress. It was only when I caught her staring that I realized her attention had shifted from the dress to my hair.

"Yeah," I told her, catching her look. "It's my natural color."

I was sure that was what it was about. It was an odd and interesting color. I didn't mind the questioning mind.

I was wrong.

"I'm aware." She replied and her eyes remained fixed on it. "The thing is we need to fix it properly."

I frowned. "I don't think that's necessary."

"I insist."

There was something about the way she said it that told me this argument was already over.

She was already crossing toward the dresser, pulling open one drawer after another until she found what she was looking for.

"Here we are."

She held up a small collection of brushes, pins, and hair ties before gesturing toward a chair.

"Sit."

I gave her a skeptical look, but sat anyway.

Delta worked through my hair section by section, her fingers surprisingly gentle as she smoothed, separated, and arranged it. There was something oddly soothing about the repetitive motion, enough that I found myself relaxing despite my initial reluctance.

It took me back to a simpler time. It took me back to my mother and there was suddenly this gnawing feeling that consumed my insides.

The fact that I hadn't let anyone touch my hair like this in years.

Not since I killed her.

Not since the binder and the wig had become necessary parts of surviving.

Back then, there hadn't been anything personal about my appearance. Everything had been about hiding the parts of myself that could get me hurt.

This felt different.

When Delta finally stepped back, she studied her work for a moment before smiling.

"How does it look?"

I looked at myself in the mirror.

For a moment, I couldn't say anything.

The shorter length framed my face in a way I hadn't expected. Without the wig hiding it and without the careful effort I'd spent years making myself look like someone else, my features seemed softer.

Almost... pretty.

The thought felt strange.

It was not unpleasant in any way. It was just unfamiliar.

"It looks really good," I admitted, my voice coming out a little rougher than I intended.

Delta's grin widened, clearly pleased with herself.

"Just wait until you see it with the gown on and I do your makeup."

I caught her reflection in the mirror.

"Are you always this insufferable?"

"Yes," she replied without hesitation. "You'll just have to get used to me."

She began gathering the brushes and pins, looking almost excited.

"It's actually been a while since I've done anyone's makeup properly," she admitted. "I used to do it all the time, but I haven't had much reason to lately. The Lunas at Lily of the Valley all have Omegas they've already established relationships with, and Alpha Lysander is a man, so there's really no one for me to practice on."

She paused.

I turned slightly in the chair, already preparing to tell her, "I'm not so sure about the makeup part."

But before I could, something shifted in her expression.

It was brief, barely there, but I caught it. Her gaze dropped to the brushes in her hands, and for a moment she seemed to drift somewhere far beyond the room, as though something about what she'd just said had stirred a memory she hadn't meant to revisit.

"Delta?"

She blinked and looked back at me.

"Hmm?"

"You disappeared for a second."

"Yeah." A small, almost apologetic smile touched her lips. "Sorry."

She looked down at the brushes again, and something about the way she held them made me hesitate.

It felt like she needed this.

Normally, I wouldn't have cared much about makeup, and I still wasn't convinced I wanted a face full of it. But maybe it wasn't really about the makeup for her.

So I decided to let her have the moment.

"Well, if you're this good with a hairbrush," I said, turning back toward the mirror, "I can't wait to see what you can do with eyeliner."

She laughed, the tension leaving her face almost immediately.

She picked up one of the makeup brushes and twirled it between her fingers, her confidence returning in full force.

"Prepare to be wowed."

I smiled at her reflection.

"Now you're just showing off."

"Absolutely."

I watched her arrange everything she needed with the seriousness of someone preparing for battle, and a quiet smile settled on my lips.

Maybe this wasn't so bad. Maybe I could learn to enjoy things that weren't about survival.

For once, I didn't have to hide myself. I could simply exist, and perhaps even discover who I was.

That was... nice.

Chapter 94: The Sundering 1

LYSANDER

They carried the Delicate down to the infirmary on a stretcher, her ruined eyes already wrapped in a strip of clean cloth. Red seeped faintly through the fabric with every jolt of her body against the frame. Bradley walked alongside her the entire way, one hand braced against the rail, his jaw set in a hard line that told me exactly how badly this had rattled him, even if he refused to show it.

We handed her over to a pair of waiting healers at the infirmary doors and watched them wheel her inside. A room was already being prepared, curtains drawn quickly around the bed as low, urgent voices discussed which salves and bindings might slow whatever damage had already been done.

Then the doors swung shut.

Bradley and I were left standing in the corridor, the sharp smell of antiseptic and old blood still clinging to both of us from the room we'd just left.

"You should ask the healer to help her," Bradley began once the doors had settled.
"Bonnie, I mean."

"No."

He turned toward me, one eyebrow lifting.

"I want the same outcome you do," I continued. "I do. I want her eyes fixed, I want this entire mess resolved, and I want it resolved quickly. But I won't have Bonnie become the tool this house, or the Kingdom at large, reaches for every time something breaks. A wound, a curse, a mystery nobody else can solve. Someone gets hurt, and suddenly the answer is simply fetch the healer, as though she's a kettle you put on whenever you're thirsty."

Bradley remained silent, allowing me to finish.

"What she showed that entire hall last night already terrifies half this estate and fascinates the other half in equal measure. She chose to reveal what she is in the middle of all that. She chose me, despite everything, instead of keeping herself safely hidden the way she'd spent years learning to do. I refuse to repay that trust by turning her into a resource. Something summoned. Something used."

I exhaled slowly.

"If I didn't have her at all, this would still be a situation I'd be responsible for handling. I intend to find a way through it without leaning on her simply because she's the easiest path forward."

Bradley studied me for a long moment, something shifting behind his eyes that I couldn't quite name.

Respect, perhaps.

Or simple surprise that I'd thought this far ahead while everything around us was still burning.

"Understood, Your Majesty."

"The witch," I said. "Willow. Could she manage this instead?"

Bradley shook his head. "The Shelter House doesn't produce many witches skilled in healing craft. Their talents run more toward divination and protective wards. If there is any witch bloodline capable of this sort of work, what the Delicate needs is a Blossom witch. That bloodline has individuals who specialize in exactly this kind of restoration."

"Who? Do we have one on retainer somewhere?"

"Valentine Blossom's daughter. Madeline." His expression tightened as he searched his memory. "She was remarkably gifted, from what I remember of her reputation years ago. But she's estranged from her coven now. Practically off the grid, according to the last reports I had on her whereabouts."

He hesitated before adding, "And witch magic of that nature works against a clock, Your Majesty. Once too much time passes, whatever damage has already set in becomes permanent. No witch, however skilled, will be able to undo it after that window closes."

"Then find her. Or someone with similar talents. Whatever it costs, whatever favors need calling in. We owe the Delicate that much. She still has more to look into for us, and I intend to make sure she still has eyes to see it with when this is over."

Bradley nodded, already turning away, his mind clearly moving ahead to whatever message he intended to send in pursuit of a woman who apparently didn't want to be found by anyone, least of all the werewolf Crown.

I watched him disappear around the corner, then looked back toward the infirmary doors one last time.

Something had been nagging at me since before the moment the Delicate's eyes caught fire.

It had nothing to do with her.

Or at least, not directly.

"I have to go," I murmured, mostly to myself.

I made my way toward my uncle's old study. The halls were quieter now, the earliest part of morning finally settling over the estate as most of the household eased out of whatever uneasy rest they'd managed to find after everything that had happened over the past two days.

My footsteps sounded too loud against the stone, each one echoing back from walls lined with portraits of ancestors who had never once been forced to deal with anything remotely like this. I hoped.

I reached the study and locked the door behind me.

Then I crossed to the bare stretch of wall where the hidden vault waited beneath its illusion of ordinary wallpaper.

A small blade I'd taken with me from earlier was still in my possession. I drew it now and pressed its edge into my palm, cutting a shallow line through the skin. I winced at the sting, then placed my bleeding hand flat against the wall.

The magic peeled back layer by layer, the wallpaper dissolving until the reinforced steel door beneath it emerged. I turned the wheel the way I remembered Bradley doing, listening as the mechanism groaned awake, and then the door swung inward on its heavy hinges.

I stepped inside.

The tube stood exactly as it had been left hours earlier, sickly green liquid churning faintly around the suspended, hairless figure within. Wires threaded in and out of pale skin, disappearing beneath flesh as though they had grown there rather than been attached. The machinery hummed softly around him, filling the cramped vault with a sound that was almost soothing if I didn't think too hard about what was inside the glass.

I approached the tube.

"So," I murmured, my voice echoing off the metal walls and sounding smaller than I wanted it to. "Are you awake right now? Is there somehow you are doing all of this, or is it something else entirely?"

Chapter 95: The Sundering 2

LYSANDER

Nothing happened.

The man floated on, utterly motionless, his eyes closed and his chest rising and falling in a slow, artificial rhythm. The machinery seemed to dictate each breath for him, making it difficult to tell where whatever remained of his own autonomy ended and the contraption keeping him in a mostly alive state began.

I stood there for a long moment, feeling faintly ridiculous.

I wasn't even sure what I'd expected.

Perhaps a twitch.

A reaction.

Some indication that the thing inside the tube was more aware of me than it appeared.

But there was nothing.

"If it is you," I continued anyway, "know that I intend to stop you. And I intend to make certain it never happens again."

The only response was the low mechanical hum.

Eventually, I turned away.

I locked the vault behind me, watching the magic spread across the steel until the door disappeared beneath the illusion of ordinary wallpaper once more. Only then did I let my attention return to the rest of the study.

Books lined the shelves along the far wall, arranged in uneven rows with little apparent order. Letters and papers covered the desk where my uncle had once sat making decisions that apparently reached far beyond anything I'd understood while he was alive to explain them.

I moved along the shelves, running my fingers over the spines as I searched.

Then one caught my attention.

It was older than the others.

The leather had worn soft with age, cracked deeply around the corners, and there was no title on the spine at all. It looked less like a book meant to be read and more like one meant to disappear among everything else.

I pulled it free.

Dust stirred from the shelf.

When I opened it, I found handwritten pages.

The ink had faded badly in places, but the script itself was remarkably careful and dense, each line written by someone who had taken the time to record every detail rather than rush through the account.

I began turning the pages.

I wasn't sure what I was looking for. Perhaps something about the demigod I hadn't been able to stop thinking about since Bonnie words about her dream had made me start to connect this to him. Perhaps it was just cope on my end that I needed to be validated badly.

Whatever I expected, I wasn't prepared for what I found.

The account followed the broad shape of the old nursery rhyme, but where the children's version had reduced everything to a handful of harmless verses, this went much deeper.

The conflict between the Drakori and the early werewolves had apparently begun over the manner in which Lady Selene claimed and handled her own divinity. The dragon shifters had regarded it as a profound insult, one they carried with them very vocally.

And her firstborn had taken it upon himself to defend his mother's honor personally.

That decision had ignited what the account called the Sundering of Sun and Moon.

A holy war, it called it.

Lives had been lost on both sides in numbers the nursery rhyme never once mentioned, the bloodshed scrubbed clean from the children's version in favor of something safer to recite before bed.

Eventually, a truce was struck.

Punishment followed.

Then I reached the line that made my eyes stop moving.

"And the goddess cursed Lycaon, her son and my older brother."

I stopped breathing.

For several seconds, I simply stared at the sentence.

My eyes moved over it again. And again.

I leaned closer, certain the poor light had caused me to misunderstand the handwriting, but the words remained exactly where they had been.

'My older brother?'

My pulse began to pound.

I flipped backward through the pages, searching frantically for the name that would explain what I was reading.

There.

On the first page.

The handwriting was larger there, the ink even more faded, but the name was unmistakable.

The account had been written by one of my own ancestors.

The first Alpha King.

I knew his story. I knew he had been crowned only after Lady Selene permanently ascended beyond this world, abandoning her earthly affairs and leaving her bloodline to govern in her absence.

I read the name beneath the heading.

"Alpha King Lune."

I stared at it.

Then I read the line beneath it. A small acknowledgement to his mate.

Lune had been a demigod himself.

According to the accounts that had been passed since even I was a child, he had deliberately torn the divinity from his own blood so he would never be forced to outlive his beloved wife and their children by the centuries his mother's blood would otherwise have granted him.

My fingers tightened around the edge of the page.

I took a deep breath and turned back to where I'd stopped and kept reading, my pulse quickening with every line.

"My brother was proud," the account continued, "...and would not bend the knee even when the hearts of both our mother and the people of the sun had softened toward reconciliation in the years following the war's full end."

"He damned his own followers to a life of darkness and suffering rather than accept the peace that had finally been offered to him. Pride had mattered more to him than the salvation of everyone who had fought and bled beside him."

I turned the page, hungry now for whatever came next.

And found nothing.

The next several pages had been cut out entirely.

The cuts were clean and straight, made deliberately through the binding rather than torn away in haste. Only jagged remnants of paper remained, stubbornly clinging to the spine where the missing pages had once been.

I ran my thumb along one of the edges.

Someone had removed them.

Not recently, either. The exposed binding was old, the leather darkened with age, but the precision of the cuts suggested whoever had done it had known exactly what they were taking.

I stared at the gap for a long moment, my mind racing through every possible explanation.

Why remove those pages?

Why leave everything else intact?

And, more importantly, what had been important enough to erase from a family record that had apparently survived for centuries?

A knock sounded at the study door interrupting my train of thoughts.

"Who is it?" I called, not looking up from the book in my hands.

Someone cleared his throat on the other side, the sound muffled by the heavy wood.

"It's the Elder Circle, Your Majesty."

I closed my eyes briefly and drew in a slow breath.

"It's so early on the morning. What could possibly warrant this?"

"Your Majesty," an elder replied, and I recognized this one because his voice carried that particular formal patience elders seemed to cultivate for moments when they intended to insist on something without appearing to do so, "as regent, certain responsibilities now fall to you. Responsibilities the late King was actively attending to before his passing."

I looked down at the book again.

The missing pages seemed to stare back at me.

"And what responsibility," I began, closing the book carefully and slipping a thin ribbon from the desk drawer between the remaining pages to mark my place, "would that be at this particular hour?"

"The matter of the rogues," the elder answered. "The late King was discussing it with Alpha Julius Knight before his death. Given everything that has transpired, the matter now requires your attention."

Of course it did.

There was always something else.

I shut the book properly and returned it to its place on the shelf, my mind still circling everything I'd just read. The missing pages. Lycaon. Even Bonnie's safety.

I turned toward the door.

Whatever had been written on those missing pages would have to wait.

I unlocked it and pulled it open.

The elder I did recognize, but could not for any reason remember their name, stood waiting in the corridor, wearing the same careful, patient expression he probably used for every crisis, whether it involved a minor dispute between pack members or the collapse of an entire Kingdom while the others were behind him, probably after egging him on.

I stepped past him.

"Well," I murmured, forcing my attention back toward the matter at hand. "Let's not keep Alpha Julius waiting, then."

Chapter 96: Death to the rogues

LYSANDER

The throne room felt far too large for this hour of the morning, lamp light casting long shadows against stone walls that had not yet seen enough daylight to lose the chill of the night. My footsteps echoed too loudly as I approached the dais, and at its base, I hesitated, staring up at the seat waiting for me.

One of the elders leaned closer, lowering his voice until it was meant for me alone.

"You must sit, Your Majesty. It is custom."

"I'm regent," I reminded him. "Not King. At least not yet."

"Custom does not distinguish between the two."

There was not even the slightest hint of apology in his response.

I climbed the steps anyway and lowered myself into the chair.

It felt wrong beneath me immediately.

Not because the throne was uncomfortable, but because it was too large in a way that had nothing to do with its actual dimensions. It had been built for a body that had occupied it with decades of certainty, for a man who had known exactly what he was supposed to be and had never needed to question whether he belonged there.

I had held this title for less than two full days.

In many ways, it was still my uncle's seat.

I could have sworn the wood itself remembered his weight better than mine, though that was probably exhaustion talking rather than anything real.

At the base of the dais stood Alpha Julius Knight, flanked by two of his own sentinels. Once I had settled, he bowed deeply, his gray-streaked beard nearly brushing his chest.

"State your business," I instructed. "And whatever it was you were discussing with my uncle before his death. I'll be honest with you, Alpha Julius. I know very little about any of this."

He straightened slowly, his eyes lingering on me for a moment.

It was the look of an older man measuring someone younger, deciding whether he was looking at a boy who had inherited a crown or a ruler who might eventually grow into it.

"The late King was determined to handle the rogue situation directly," Julius began. "In times past, when they grew too confident or too vocal about their demands, we would take measures periodically. Remind them of the pecking order before their grievances escalated into something that could no longer be contained quietly."

Something in my stomach tightened at the word measures.

It was vague enough to mean almost anything, which somehow made it worse.

I understood the logic behind it, even if I disliked the shape it took. My uncle had been King. Kings made decisions that left little room for sentiment, decisions that sometimes cost lives in order to preserve order or at least the illusion of it.

But the rogues he had been managing that way were not monsters simply because they wanted a different life.

They were disgruntled. Desperate. People who had looked at the world they were born into and decided that the risk of losing everything was preferable to accepting what had been handed to them at birth.

And now, whatever my uncle had intended to do about them had become my responsibility.

"I've also," Julius continued, "for reasons I won't pretend to fully understand, become something of a fixation among the more moderate rogue factions. The ones who still believe dialogue is worth attempting before everyone simply burns the whole system down together. You could call it a network, of sorts. Shaky. Entirely unofficial. But real enough that they send word through me rather than attacking blindly, the way the more radical elements tend to."

He paused, his expression tightening.

"I received a new message recently. That's why I'm here. I need to know how you'd like us to respond."

"What message?"

"After the violence done to the King, we received new threats from the more radical factions." His face darkened. "Not the moderates I usually deal with. These factions are demanding an end to the entire caste system. A complete restructuring of werewolf society from the ground up, beginning immediately. Otherwise, they promise war."

He let the word settle between us.

"I believe we should take it seriously too. It is not sound like the usual skirmishes or the occasional uprising we've grown accustomed to containing quietly. It's war."

"As much as I'd like a system rebuilt from nothing to be a simple fix," I replied, "tearing everything down and starting over isn't a solution. Neither is war."

"I disagree, your Majesty."

The response came immediately, firm and entirely without hesitation.

"I suspect the Elder Circle will as well."

His gaze shifted toward the elders lining the walls on either side of the throne room.

He was right. Several nodded in silent agreement.

Their expressions carried that particular blend of certainty and thinly veiled impatience I had already grown tired of in less than days of wearing this title.

"Ordinarily," Julius went on, "I would say we decimate them outright. Call this what it usually is, the same posturing they've engaged in for generations. The lesser members of our society demanding to be treated as something they were never born to become."

My jaw tightened.

"But murdering the King has apparently given them new pride. New audacity." His fingers curled slowly at his sides. "it happened because we did not see them as true threats before. We cannot afford to dismiss their words this time, Your Majesty."

His jaw flexed beneath his beard.

"They're no longer asking to be reasoned with. They're calling for the eradication of our tradition itself. Of the entire structure that has held this society together for centuries. A millennium even. That is anarchy, plain and simple."

He took a step forward.

"And granting them an audience means treating them as a legitimate threat worth negotiating with. That only emboldens every other faction watching to see how we respond. If they believe violence can earn them a seat at this table, what do you think will happen when the next volatile think-group decides they want something, Your Majesty?"

The room remained silent.

"For what was done to the King alone," Julius added, "they owe reparations. A thousand heads would not be an unreasonable demand, given the scale of what they have already taken from this house and Kingdom at large."

The words settled over the room like a verdict already passed.

I felt the weight of every eye turn toward me, waiting to see which direction I would lean.

"Not everyone within a system agrees with everything that system enforces."

My voice sounded steadier than I felt.

"I, for one, don't agree with this particular solution."

Chapter 97: How I rule

LYSANDER

Julius watched me closely, but I continued before he could interrupt.

"Violence answered with more violence is not justice. It's a cycle that never actually ends, Julius. It simply changes whose blood gets spilled next."

I looked toward the elders.

"Generation after generation, we keep calling it order because the same people are always holding the weapons. We keep calling it tradition because nobody wants to admit that something can survive for centuries and still be wrong."

A few faces hardened.

I expected that.

What I had not expected was how much easier it became to say the words once they were out.

"If the rogues are demanding change, then perhaps we should ask why they believe war is their only way to be heard. Perhaps we should ask what pushed them far enough that dying became preferable to continuing as they are."

I leaned back against the throne, resisting the strange urge to look toward my uncle's empty chambers as though he might somehow tell me what to do.

"I won't order a thousand deaths simply because they challenged a system that was already failing them."

The silence that followed was heavier than before.

"And I won't accept for that to be seen as weakness simply because I'm unwilling to answer their anger with my own."

The elders exchanged glances, several expressions souring visibly as murmurs rippled through the room. Julius's jaw worked before he spoke again, his tone noticeably sharper than it had been moments before.

"Are you suggesting that we legitimize them by granting an audience at all? That we sit down as equals with people who put a blade to your own uncle's throat?"

I held his gaze.

"Watch your language, Alpha Julius." The words were quiet, but they carried.

His expression shifted almost imperceptibly.

"You are speaking to the Regent of this kingdom, whether you agree with my decisions or not. You may challenge my judgment. You may disagree with my orders. But you will not speak to me as though I am some inexperienced pup whose authority you are free to question simply because you happen to dislike the answer."

I let the silence stretch for a beat before continuing.

"And you will be careful about reducing an entire faction to the actions of whoever killed my uncle. If we are going to solve this, then we need to be precise about who we are dealing with."

Julius's mouth tightened, but he gave a restrained nod.

"Over the years," I continued, "we've lost countless low-ranking werewolves to these rogue factions. Not through force. Through persuasion. Through a promise that is clearly compelling enough that people willingly walk away from everything they've built here to join them instead."

I allowed that to settle, watching several faces shift uncomfortably.

"Top-ranking werewolves, like you and me, aren't entirely innocent in why that promise sounds appealing to people who feel unheard. We have a stake in understanding exactly what is driving that exodus, rather than simply cutting down everyone who leaves."

No one interrupted me this time.

"There will be punishment," I continued, my voice hardening, "for whoever actually killed my uncle or had a hand in it. That much is not negotiable, and I will not pretend otherwise to anyone in this room."

My fingers tightened against the armrest.

"But once that matter is settled properly, the higher ranks and I can meet with the moderates among them on equal ground. We can talk properly, face to face, instead of continuing to trade threats through intermediaries while more people die on both sides for no reason beyond pride and stubbornness."

I looked directly at Julius.

"That is the message I want carried back. Exactly as I've stated it. Nothing softened. Nothing added."

Several elders began arguing at once.

Voices overlapped, rising into a jumble I could barely separate into individual sentences. Weakness. Fear. Precedent. What the packs would think. What my uncle would have done.

The same objections dressed in different words.

"Your uncle," one elder called over the others, stepping forward, "built the stability this house currently enjoys precisely by never once showing rogues this kind of consideration."

The room quieted enough for me to hear him clearly.

"My uncle is dead."

The words left my mouth before I could soften them.

"Killed inside his own library, inside his own home, by people who clearly felt they had nothing left to lose."

I looked around the room.

"Perhaps that stability wasn't quite as stable as we had all convinced ourselves it was."

That landed harder than I expected.

Silence followed, deeper than any of the arguments had managed to produce.

I raised a hand before anyone could recover enough to challenge me again.

"Last I checked, I am the Alpha King currently sitting in this seat, regent or not."

My gaze moved from one elder to the next.

"Unless that has somehow changed in the last five minutes without anyone thinking to inform me, my word is law here."

No one spoke.

"Deliver my message. Bring me their response, whatever it turns out to be."

I leaned forward slightly.

"And when it comes, I want it delivered directly to me. Not filtered through three different advisors first. If they have something to say to this kingdom, then I intend to hear it myself."

Silence settled thick and fast after that, the kind that came from people biting down on further protest rather than actually agreeing with the outcome.

Julius bowed, lower this time and longer than his first bow.

"Of course, Your Majesty."

The elders followed suit, one after another, murmured agreements passing between them even as several expressions made it painfully clear that their minds had not changed. They had simply recognized that arguing further in front of me would accomplish nothing beyond wasting everyone's time.

"I'll expect word within the day," I instructed, rising from the chair that still didn't feel like mine. "Whatever their answer is, I want it delivered directly to me."

"Understood," Julius replied.

The room began to empty slowly, elders filing out in twos and threes, murmuring among themselves in tones too low for me to catch.

Julius lingered.

He stood at the foot of the dais for a moment longer, studying me with an expression I couldn't quite decipher.

It wasn't anger. Not entirely. There was something else beneath it, something closer to calculation.

As though, for the first time, he was no longer looking at the young man who had inherited his uncle's throne.

"You remind me of him, you know," he said finally. "Your uncle. Not in the ways you'd expect. He hated this chair too, during the first few months. Said it never quite felt like it belonged to him either."

I looked at the throne beneath me.

"Did that feeling ever pass?"

"Eventually."

Something almost like amusement touched the corner of Julius's mouth, though it disappeared quickly.

"Though I suspect, given everything happening around this house, you may not have the luxury of easing into it the way he did."

He bowed once more, then turned and walked away.

I watched him disappear through the great doors before finally allowing myself to sink back against the throne.

And that was when my phone buzzed against my hip.

I pulled it free, grateful for any excuse to look away from the throne, the empty room, and the weight that seemed to settle more heavily around me now that there was no one left to distract me from it.

It was a message from Fia and it said: "I'm close."

I read it twice.

Something in my chest loosened, just slightly at the sight of it as I started to type back.

To heal a Rogue

JOHANN

The knocking dragged me up out of sleep for the second time that morning, and I lay there for a moment, glaring at the ceiling before finally hauling myself upright.

"Who is it?" I called, making no effort to hide the irritation in my voice.

"High Beta Bradley."

Something in me actually laughed at that. Quiet, private, entirely at Bradley's expense. Of all the people to come knocking after a night like this one, the universe had apparently decided to send me the single man I most enjoyed unsettling. Aside my dear cousin of course.

I crossed the room and opened the door, giving him exactly one look at my face before turning my back on him and walking farther into the room. I hooked my fingers beneath the hem of my shirt and pulled it over my head.

"To what do I owe this pleasure?"

I tossed the shirt onto a chair and reached for the waistband of my trousers.

"It might be best if you kept your clothes on."

Bradley's voice had gone suspiciously flat.

"They're sweaty." I worked the waistband loose. "And we're both men. Unless, of course, there's some reason this bothers you so much. You have kids so I do hope that is not the case."

His jaw tightened.

He ignored the jab entirely, which was almost more satisfying than if he'd taken the bait.

"The rogue we captured," he continued, "made mention of something before he escaped custody. Something concerning. Unfounded, most likely, but the Elder Circle heard it, and now we have to consider it regardless of how baseless it sounds."

I turned to face him properly, letting my trousers hang loose at my hips.

Bradley's gaze dropped for half a second before he caught himself and looked pointedly at the wall beside my head.

I smiled. "Is that so?"

"He claimed..." Bradley's eyes returned to mine. "He claimed he was ordered to kill the King by you."

A slow, disbelieving laugh escaped me.

"And you believe that?"

"Of course not." His expression hardened. "The rogue network exists specifically to sow discord. Lies are their currency."

He hesitated.

That pause told me there was more.

"But when I spoke with the Elder Circle, something else caught their attention. The reason he gave for why you'd supposedly want your own father dead."

"Humor me."

"He claimed you weren't the biological son of the King."

Silence settled between us.

I let it linger.

One second.

Then two.

I even let it stretch to three.

Long enough to make the shock believable, but not so long that it became theatrical.

"I want that bastard's tongue." My voice came out low and vicious.

"So do I." Bradley's mouth tightened. "Unfortunately, the bastard in question has vanished. A jailbreak, most likely, given the state we found his room in. So all we currently have is his word. Which, again, means very little on its own. But still, the elders circle have latched on to it."

Something in my chest threatened to burst into laughter.

My mother hadn't been exaggerating after all. She'd handled it exactly as promised, and here was Bradley standing in my room at an ungodly hour, delivering the very news she'd already prepared me to receive.

"Don't tell me," I replied, carefully arranging my face into offended disbelief, "that any of you actually put stock in those lies."

"Before it festers out of control, we want that particular lie dead on arrival. I already spoke with your mother about it this very morning, when she arrived. She agreed entirely."

"I see."

I let another beat pass.

Then I allowed my shoulders to loosen, watching the tension drain from my posture.

"If that's the case, then I don't mind."

Bradley blinked.

It was quick, barely there, but I caught it.

His shoulders had been squared for a confrontation. Now they dropped a fraction, as though he'd been holding himself ready to absorb a blow that never came. His mouth opened, then closed again. For perhaps the first time since he'd walked through my door, he seemed to have no prepared response.

His eyes narrowed slightly. "You don't?"

I shook my head. "No."

Another pause followed.

Bradley glanced at me, then at the discarded shirt, then very deliberately back at my face.

"I expected more resistance."

That nearly made me laugh.

"I can tell."

His brow furrowed.

"Then why aren't you angry?"

I leaned against the edge of the table, folding my arms.

"Because there's nothing to be angry about."

For a moment, he simply stared at me.

Then the corner of his mouth twitched.

It was not quite a smile.

I had to bite back a smile at the sight of it.

He'd expected refusal. Outrage, perhaps. Accusations of disrespect, of overreach, of the Elder Circle daring to question royal blood on the word of a rogue who'd already proven himself a liar and a murderer.

If my mother hadn't gotten to me first, hadn't filled me in on exactly what was coming and why I needed to play along without flinching, I imagine I would have given him precisely that reaction.

And precisely the ammunition he was hoping to walk away with.

But that wasn't the game anymore.

"When do you need the blood?" I asked. "Should I come down to the infirmary myself?"

I pushed my trousers down and reached for my briefs.

Bradley's eyes flicked downward before he caught himself. His expression tightened.

Whatever he'd been expecting from me, this clearly wasn't it.

"That won't be necessary." He cleared his throat, his attention settling firmly on my face. "I brought a healer with me. She can draw it here."

He snapped his fingers and I swear I saw someone move in the corner.

I turned sharply and I was right.

A young woman stepped out from the shadows beside the door, and I stared at her for a moment before realizing she'd apparently been standing there the entire time. She'd positioned herself so neatly against the wall that I'd never even noticed her.

Her gaze found me, then widened.

Color rushed into her cheeks, and she immediately turned toward the wall.

"I'm so sorry, Your Highness." The words tumbled out in a mortified whisper. "I didn't mean to—"

To heal a Rogue

JOHANN

"It's fine."

I retrieved my pants and pulled them back into place with deliberate calm. Entirely for Bradley's benefit.

He was the type to rage about how a royal was supposed to carry themselves. Hell, he'd been the one to train me for battle. It was one of his many quirks.

"You can come do what you were called here to do."

The healer nodded without turning around. "Yes, Your Highness."

She crossed the room, keeping her eyes carefully fixed somewhere above my shoulder. A small kit rested in her hands, already prepared, the needle and vial catching the morning light that spilled through the windows.

"I apologize again," she murmured as she knelt beside the chair. "This will only take a moment."

"Take your time." I settled into the chair and gave her my arm. "I'm in no rush."

Her fingers were steady as she tied the band around my arm and found the vein. The needle slipped in with a brief sting, barely enough to register.

I watched the vial fill.

With rich, dark and perfectly ordinary blood.

To anyone looking at it, trained eye or untrained eye, it was simply the blood of a King's true and legitimate heir.

And, for now, it was.

The healer withdrew the needle, pressed a piece of cotton against the puncture, and carefully sealed the vial.

"All done."

"Thank you," Bradley murmured.

He took the vial from her himself, examining it for a moment before slipping it into a small case lined with velvet. The sort of case meant to protect something precious during transport.

"Thank you for cooperating," he added.

I looked up at him.

Then I smiled. I tried my best to give him the most wide, easy and charming one that I could muster.

"Well, I have nothing to hide."

The words landed exactly where I intended them to.

Bradley didn't answer immediately.

His gaze remained on me, moving over my face as though he might find the lie there if he stared long enough. His fingers tightened around the little velvet-lined case.

There it was again. That faint furrow between his brows.

It was not suspicion exactly.

Not yet at least.

But something had shifted.

"I'll have the results within the day," he finally replied.

I gave him another pleasant smile. "I'll sleep peacefully until then."

His eyes narrowed by the slightest degree.

I nearly laughed and it took everything I had not to.

"I'll get back to you, your Highness."

"Wonderful," I replied. "I look forward to putting this ugly business behind us."

He gave me a brief, formal bow and gestured for the healer to go ahead of him.

She slipped past me with her eyes fixed firmly on the floor, clutching her kit against her chest as though it might somehow make her less aware of the fact that she'd just drawn royal blood from a half-dressed prince.

Bradley followed a step behind.

He had one foot over the threshold when he paused and glanced back at me.

"For what it's worth," he murmured, "I never doubted you for a moment."

It was such a polished lie that, in another life, I might have admired it.

Perhaps, if I hadn't already known exactly why he was here, I might even have believed him.

"How reassuring."

His mouth twitched, though whether he'd caught the sarcasm or simply wanted to pretend he hadn't, I couldn't tell.

Then he turned and disappeared into the corridor.

The door clicked shut.

I remained where I was for a moment, staring at the wood, replaying the conversation piece by piece.

My mother's plan was already moving faster than I'd expected.

The test has already happened.

My vial of blood had been taken.

And soon, the result would give them exactly what they needed to dismiss the rumor, and everyone would stop asking questions.

For now.

That was the part neither Bradley nor the Elder Circle knew.

The blood they'd taken today would prove exactly what they expected it to prove. It would silence the whispers, settle the questions, and give everyone enough certainty to stop digging.

But it wouldn't last.

My birthday was coming.

And when it did, my blood and physiology would change.

There would be no clever explanation for that. No convenient rogue to blame. No test my mother could manipulate after the fact. Whatever happened when I came of age would be written into me, impossible to hide once it began.

It was still a terrifying thought to have to ponder over. This curse.

I crossed the room and stopped beside the window.

Outside, sentinels moved along the perimeter in slow, measured patrols, their figures dark against the pale grounds. Beyond them, the first real heat of morning had begun spilling over the horizon, turning the estate bright by degrees.

I rested one hand against the slowly heating glass.

My mother had promised me everything I'd lost would be returned.

My place. My name. My future.

She had promised that every tongue that had wagged against me would eventually fall silent.

I intended to hold her to every word. Until then, I would play my part.

I would smile when they expected anger. Cooperate when they expected resistance. Let them believe this little test had settled everything.

And when my birthday finally came, I would deal with whatever waited on the other side of it.

Blood test or otherwise.

It had been almost five minutes since Bradley left when another knock sounded at the door, softer this time.

"It's me, Johann." My mother's voice came from the other side.

I crossed the room and opened the door, already half turned, ready to tell her about Bradley's visit, the blood test, the whole tidy little performance I had just finished putting on.

Then I saw the girl standing beside her.

My eyes widened before I could stop them.

Dark hair. Cornflower-blue eyes that seemed to catch every scrap of light spilling from the corridor. She was dressed in black, simple but impeccably cut, and there was something about the way she carried herself that immediately caught my attention. She stood perfectly still, composed in a way that felt almost unnatural, watching me with an interest that somehow seemed less like curiosity and more like recognition.

For a moment, none of us moved.

"Mother," I began slowly, my attention flicking from her to the girl and back again.
"Bradley just—"

"I know," she said, cutting me off smoothly, already stepping past me into the room like she owned it, the girl following a beat behind her. "I passed him in the corridor. He looked rather pleased with himself."

I closed the door and turned to face them both, my gaze settling on the girl again.

"He saw her?" I asked.

"He saw an Omega," the girl replied, an amused edge creeping into her voice. "I happen to be a very talented shapeshifter."

Mother nodded, looking entirely too pleased with herself. Then she gestured toward the girl with the particular satisfaction of a woman unveiling a gift she was certain would be well received.

"Johann, meet Willow Shelter."

To heal a Rogue

LYSANDER

I typed back, How close?, as I moved through the corridor, already picturing where she would be pulling in. When I rounded the corner, I nearly walked straight into Amaranthine.

She wasn't alone.

Beside her stood an older man, broad through the shoulders, gray threading heavily through his dark hair. There was a composed authority about him, the kind that came from decades of sitting at the head of a pack and being obeyed without question.

I recognized him.

The recognition brought a rush of memories with it, some cold, some painfully warm, all tangled up with the things I had once said to his face.

I started to bow on instinct, offering the courtesy owed to an Alpha of his standing.

"You're Regent now, Your Majesty," he said, stopping me with a raised hand. "It should be me bowing to you."

He turned to his daughter, and as if on cue, they both lowered themselves into a formal bow.

"It's been a long time since we last met," he remarked as he straightened.

"Last time we did meet, you promised war," I replied, a dry edge creeping into his voice.

"You rejected your union with my daughter," he continued. "It was an insult to my pack at the time, and not one I've entirely forgotten."

"Father," Amaranthine cut in, a small laugh in her voice, "we shouldn't rehash something that happened so long ago. We were children. He has grown so much now I am sure."

That was when I started to wonder what the heck this was really about.

Yannis exhaled through his nose. "You're right."

"How's the healer?" Amaranthine asked, tilting her head. "Did she like my soup?"

"She did. Thank you for that." I lied through my teeth.

"Is there a reason you're both here?" I asked.

Yannis nodded. "We heard you were in the throne room this morning, and it seemed fitting to discuss business while you were already close by."

My phone buzzed against my palm.

I looked and it was from Fia. She said she was about to cross the gate.

"Is this a pack issue, or—"

Yannis laughed, cutting me off. "Nothing like that. It's simply the matter of my daughter's betrothal. To you."

I laughed too, genuinely surprised. "What does that mean? Amaranthine is Johann's intended, not mine."

Yannis gave a nervous laugh of his own. "Well. Johann isn't the one currently sitting on the throne. You are."

"And is that supposed to change something?" I asked.

I turned to Amaranthine. "Is this what you wanted to speak with me about?"

"Yes." She hesitated. "There was simply so much happening yesterday, I didn't get the chance."

"There's still a great deal happening. Even today. I'm not interested in this discussion."

I looked back at her father. "Was a connection to the throne the entire reason she was matched with Johann in the first place?"

"It's politics, Your Majesty." Yannis's tone shifted, the nervousness disappearing and something sharper taking its place. "You should remember why my daughter was given to Johann to begin with. The union was originally between the two of you, and you rejected her. To prevent a war between a pack as great as mine and yours, your uncle, the King, promised us his son instead. The chance for my bloodline to eventually produce the future King of this Kingdom. That will unfortunately not be Johann anymore."

"Don't blame me for that." I held his gaze. "Blame Johann and perhaps his mother for their own reckless actions leading up to it. The throne was his."

"It doesn't matter whose actions caused what." Yannis's expression hardened. "Johann was never the reason the choice was originally made. I do not care what male my daughter becomes married too. I care about the title that will come with it. My daughter becoming Queen and her offsprings becoming Princes and Princesses who have a chance for the Alpha King seat in the near future. That was what I was promised and the word of the Alpha King is law, Your Majesty. Even after his passing. We hold a sealed contract to prove our claims too."

His voice hardened further. "We came here to deal with you fairly, Your Majesty. But we will not be mocked. I will not be mocked a second time in my life by you."

"Father—" Amaranthine cut in.

"I'd suggest you watch your tone," I warned, my voice quiet but final, "before you find yourself spending a few nights in a drafty cell, thinking it over on an empty stomach."

He stepped back half an inch, something flickering across his face before he quickly composed himself.

"I apologize, Your Majesty."

Amaranthine bowed as well, her movements quick and stiff.

But I was done with this weird conversation.

"This discussion is over."

I turned and started walking past them both.

I glanced down at my phone. Fia had sent another message.

"I thought you would be outside. Should I come in?"

I was already typing my reply when Yannis's voice came again from behind me.

"In exchange for the preservation of peace between the Crown and the Chonto house of pack Evernight, the Crown shall unite the bloodlines through marriage, and the offspring of that union shall stand among the recognized royal heirs of the Kingdom."

That caused me to stop and I turned back to face him. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

Alpha Yannis stepped forward, seemingly ignoring my question as he continued with what I could only imagine were clauses in a contract.

"Should the designated royal party become incapable of fulfilling the union by death, disinheritance, abdication, or removal from succession, the Crown shall designate another eligible member of the royal bloodline to fulfill the agreement."

Did Uncle Cornelius really say that?

Yannis's mouth curved into something entirely too satisfied for a man who had just handed me a threat disguised as a legal argument.

"We aren't breaking any laws," he said. "We aren't even being difficult. You're soon to be King, and the onus for honoring your family's commitments falls squarely on you now."