



THE Werewolf Count AND THE Trickster Tailor 2

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Chapter 1: Not Even Enough Time to Enjoy a Date

ON that day, a calm dusk settled over the shantytown on the outskirts of the imperial capital.

As far as Rock knew, there'd been one case of a wallet being nicked and three pickpockets caught red-handed on Market Street during the day, and the city constables had kept dropping by her place on patrol. At Floria Clothes Shop, there'd been one custom-made order, two ready-made garment purchasers, and five mending requests.

One drunk who'd mistaken the shop for a tavern and one conman selling suspicious get-rich-quick-schemes had also come inside but were quickly driven away by Phoebe's death glare.

It truly was a peaceful day like any other.

After closing up shop, Rock headed with Ebel to do some shopping on Market Street. They were out to buy ingredients for dinner.

"I could swear I invited *you* to dinner..."

Ebel cocked his head to the side, baffled by the turn of events as they walked shoulder-to-shoulder down the busy street.

"You did, which is *why* we are going shopping," Rock replied, batting her eyes at him as if his comment was strange.

Ebel had certainly invited Rock to dinner when he came by the shop. That's when Phoebe, who happened to be present, asked them to eat at his place.

It just so happened to be evening and Ebel was the day's last customer. Rock decided to close early and take Ebel shopping with her. The plan was to go back to Phoebe's place, where he was waiting for them, after they'd bought all the ingredients.

"Don't worry. Phoebe's a great cook."

Rock was thrilled by the unexpected new plans for her evening.

She was equally looking forward to Phoebe's home cooking and spending some quality time with Ebel for the first time in a while. She was also happy her father had invited him over. Surely, a delightful dinner awaited them.

"Phoebe can make just about everything and fast too. Probably because he had to cook on the go as an explorer. He's not just fast either—the food tastes heavenly!"

Ebel broke out in a wide grin.

"You sound excited, Rock."

"I am! We haven't had a chance to spend time together in a while."

Ten days had passed since Guido Linus had become a werewolf.

Today marked the first time Rock had seen Ebel since that night, and they both had so much to discuss with the other. Rock had a mountain of questions for him. How were the repairs faring at Mateus Manor? Had Johanna and the others recovered from their injuries? And how was Ebel feeling now? Was he able to come to terms with his feelings since then?

More than anything else, she wanted to see Ebel smile.

"I hope you enjoy yourself as well."

Ebel seemed convinced by her explanation.

"Then I'll happily eat at your father's house," he said, giving in to the change in plans.

"Please do!"

"I hope you'll treat me to your cooking next time," he shrewdly added.

"I better practice then."

"You're already great at it. That wheat porridge was phenomenal."

Rock had served him porridge for breakfast the last time he stayed over at her place. Ebel had been stuck in werewolf form then, so she'd made something easier for him to eat.

But wheat porridge was too easy to make to call it cooking.

“I need to make something fancier if I’m going to be serving a count.”

Ebel firmly shook his head, denying Rock’s supposition.

“Please don’t think that way. I’m happy with anything made by you.” He paused, then continued softly, as if relishing the memory. “Your kindness that night and the morning after touched me in ways I’d never felt before. I’ll never forget the taste of your porridge either.”

Rock gazed up at his handsome side profile with his eyes cast down, feeling a similar curious sentiment.

That night had become an unforgettable, heartwarming memory for her too.

After walking in silence, they eventually spotted a neighborhood lined with stalls and tents at the street corner.

This was Market Street’s famous Hawker Square.

In addition to freshly harvested fish, meat, and vegetables, there was a wide range of items sold there, like black market goods, stolen goods, and smuggled goods that couldn’t be brought into the imperial capital’s commercial district. Only human trafficking was forbidden on these streets.

Rock often shopped here, but she never bought thread or fabrics for the shop from these stalls. She didn’t want to have anyone picking a fight with her later, claiming she’d sold them stolen goods.

But food was the one thing no one could contest once it was eaten.

“Ebel, let’s check out the meat at that shop first,” Rock suggested, pointing to one of the outdoor stalls.

A butcher wielding a large cleaver had set up a stall among the street vendors. Racks of lamb and pork that’d been drained of blood hung from the stall, and they’d arrived just in time to see another customer getting their cut of meat.

“Phoebe wanted me to buy chicken,” Rock continued, taking Ebel’s hand to lead him closer.

Ebel suddenly frowned.

“...I hear people arguing.”

“What? Where?” Rock asked, but even her human ears immediately picked up the sound.

She turned just in time to see someone being knocked back into a nearby stall. The wooden frame collapsed with a loud crack, and the man who’d fallen on it after being either shoved or punched was grabbed by the collar by another man as he tried to stand.

“Ya damn swindler! How’re ya gonna pay me back for this, huh?!”

His angry shout echoed, and the nearby shoppers moved away from the area faster than the tide receding, forming a wide-berthed crowd around the broken stall.

Rock doubted anyone in their right mind would want to get involved in this mess...

“Let’s break it up, shall we, fellows? I can’t have you fighting in the middle of the street like this.”

Ebel rushed in and told them to stop without hesitation.

Both men stopped dumbfounded and looked at him.

Rock plunged into the center of the crowd, following him, and realized she knew the man being held by his collar. She recognized his dull silver hair and effeminate features—and wished she didn’t.

“Krister Gionet!”

As soon as she knew he was involved, Rock had a rough idea of what had transpired without having to ask.

“Is he an acquaintance of yours?”

“Not really,” Rock answered Ebel’s question with a strained smile. “I just know him because he’s a tailor too.”

Ready-made clothes, scraps of cloth, and decorative buttons in a bamboo basket were strewn about the crushed stall, attesting to his profession.

Krister was Floria Clothes Shop’s business rival, to be exact. He seemed to have an endless supply of customers, as he worked for cheap. Those same

customers tried to haggle Rock's prices down by saying "Krister's shop is cheaper." So it went without saying that Rock viewed him as little more than a nuisance.

"Why, if it isn't Rock Floria..."

Krister casually raised his hand in greeting, his cheeks swollen.



But his smugness deflated under the glare of the man who'd hit him.

"Stay outta this! I'm the *victim* 'ere!"

The man who yelled at them was, by all appearances, a no-good thug. Rock didn't recognize him, but his kind were a dime a dozen in the slums.

"*You're* the victim?"

"What did you do this time, Krister?"

Ebel blinked as Rock questioned Krister.

"Just doing business is all," Krister answered with a cocky laugh. "This... gentleman here wanted a pair of trousers, so I sold them at the right price."

"Right price, my foot! Trousers shouldn't tear just from bending over!" The customer lost his temper and bore down on Krister. "The ladies laughed at me when they tore and exposed my ass! Ya made me a laughingstock!"

That's some bad luck right there, Rock thought.

Krister was infamous for his workmanship being as cheap as his prices. Many people complained about how their newly bought clothes tore or fell apart at the seams right away. The only reason he continued to have an endless supply of customers was because the slums were full of people who could barely afford to get by each day. Few were wealthy enough to pay for something of decent quality.

That being said, buying from Krister was the definition of getting what you pay for.

"Sorry, friend! I've been busy lately and got a little sloppy."

Krister's apathetic apology finally caused the customer to explode with anger.

"Don't think I'll let ya off the hook... Gimme back my money!"

"Fine! I'll pay you back."

"Ya better pay *extra* for embarrassin' me!"

The customer was reasonably angry, but that didn't give him the right to demand more than he was due.

“I understand how you feel, but let’s just settle this with a refund,” Rock interjected, hoping to end things amicably. “Krister will never pay extra. You’re just wasting your time threatening him.”

“Shut up, cheeky brat!”

Ebel swiftly moved in front of Rock when the man yelled at her.

“Honor isn’t something you can buy with money. If you want to rinse away your shame, stop threatening people and start acting like a gentleman.”

Whether the count was trying to advise or provoke with that sound argument —

“What the hell did ya just say to me?!”

—it caused the man to finally lose it.

He tossed Krister to the side and charged straight at Ebel.

He pulled out a dagger but was no match for Ebel, even with a weapon. In the blink of an eye, Ebel knocked the dagger out of the man’s hand, twisted his wrist, and slammed him down to the ground.

“Damn swindler! Curse you!”

The customer staggered to his feet and ran away, cursing them. He shoved his way through the crowd and quickly disappeared down the street.

“Well...that was child’s play.”

The sound of things being roughly scooped up off the ground drowned out Ebel’s exasperated voice. Rock turned around just in time to see Krister gather the last of his wares from the broken stall before making a break for it.

“I owe you one, Rock Floria! Thank your buddy for me too!”

“Huh? Tell him yourself—wait, where are you going?!”

“I’m not stickin’ around for the constables! Take care of the rest for me. Ta-ta!”

Krister Gionet disappeared into the crowds ten times faster than the thug had.

All that was left was a trashed stall, decorative buttons scattered on the ground, and the crowd surrounding Rock and Ebel.

“Are you hurt, Ebel?”

Rock returned to her senses first and offered Ebel her handkerchief, but he gently refused it.

“I’m fine. But do you think I shouldn’t have gotten involved?”

“Krister would have been stabbed if you hadn’t intervened, Ebel.”

Rock was sure of it. At least his life was saved, if nothing else.

Sadly, she knew this wouldn’t be enough to make Krister turn over a new leaf. He was bound to cause trouble again soon.

“I would like to think I helped too...” Ebel sighed, unsure how to feel about it all. “There’s all sorts of people in this city, huh?”

The slums were the stomping grounds for people who’d been forced out of the imperial capital. And even with quarrels like this, it was considered business as usual—just another peaceful day.

“I’m sorry you had to see that.”

Ebel’s golden eyes widened at Rock’s apology.

“Why are you apologizing? Besides, I didn’t find it the least bit upsetting.”

“Really? But...”

“I might even call it thrilling. This district continues to amuse me,” Ebel said with ease, offering Rock a gentle smile. “Now then, why don’t we get on with our shopping? Eating delicious food is the best way to change the mood.”

Rock felt like she finally understood what it meant for someone to touch your heart. So she returned his smile with a genuine one of her own.

“...Okay. Let’s go, Ebel!”



“**THAT** punk Krister got himself into trouble again?” Phoebe sighed as soon as he heard what happened from Rock and Ebel when they got to his house. “I

knew he'd get stabbed someday doing business that way."

"He avoided getting stabbed this time thanks to His Excellency," Rock responded wryly, handing Phoebe the meat and vegetables she bought at Hawker Square.

Phoebe accepted the ingredients and carried them to the kitchen while checking to make sure they got everything.

He had returned home first to remove his makeup and change out of his dress into a pair of slacks. He normally wore comfortable, feminine clothes at home too, but now that Rock thought about it, he might've changed to come across as more "fatherly" in front of his daughter's beau.

Ebel already knew about Phoebe's two identities, so he could've stayed in whatever outfit made him most comfortable, but Rock didn't say anything because she wanted to respect her father's choice. Just as she'd respected his decision when he asked her to specifically refer to him as "he/him" rather than "she/her" as she'd grown accustomed to.

"Does he always do business like that?" Ebel asked, sitting on the sofa like a proper houseguest.

Rock and Phoebe nodded in perfect unison.

"He's the type to try to make the most money possible with the least amount of work."

"He's an underselling business rival, I'd say."

"...Oh dear. It sounds like I helped someone I shouldn't have."

Ebel rubbed his temples with mixed emotions.

But Count Mateus was not the kind of man to let Krister get killed in front of him, even if he knew the truth about him. He had something to him the people of the slums didn't, and that was exactly what drew Rock to him.

"Let's forget about him," Rock chirped, trying to brighten the mood. "His nastiness will leave our minds once we get some delicious food in us."

"That little punk wouldn't learn any better even if he got a knife to the gut," Phoebe added, purposely trying to sound mean. "Knowing him, he's already

drowning the memory with a bottle of ale. We're just wasting our time thinking about that troublemaker."

Ebel finally smiled after both Rock and Phoebe put it like that.

"In that case, I'll forget him as well... On another note..." His golden eyes took in the room and widened in awe. "This is my first time visiting your home, and it's...not what I was expecting."

"What were you expecting?" Phoebe asked.

"Something more feminine," Ebel answered honestly.

Phoebe's apartment was located down the alley behind Market Street.

Brick apartments counted as fairly good dwellings in the slums, and his castle was located on the top floor, where the rent was the cheapest. It was a five-story building, so you wouldn't want to live there unless you were a brave soul with strong legs.

He had a one-bedroom apartment where the kitchen and living room shared the same space. Phoebe's prized possessions decorated the living area the three of them were in. Jewel-encrusted ceremonial swords, frayed ancient imperial textiles, beautiful agate and ivory vases, well-used iron armor—all items Phoebe had collected in his mercenary days.

All those items he used to stuff into his room to hide them from Rock now served as decoration for Phoebe's whole apartment. In return, his bedroom was outfitted with Rock's tailored dresses and Phoebe's favorite makeup and accessories.

Every time Rock visited, she asked to hear about his life, and her father regaled her with stories of his exciting adventures. She also had him teach her how to apply makeup and perfumes, making spending time together as parent and child more fulfilling than ever before.

The three of them were enjoying dinner together in that very living room Phoebe prided himself on.

Tonight's menu was three-bean stew, pickled cabbage, and chicken roasted on lightly baked bread. They were also having the pomegranates and apricots

Rock had splurged on. She thought they should have a proper meal with the count in attendance.

Phoebe also pulled out all the stops to make a first-class meal, which Ebel praised with every bite.

“Your food is really fantastic.”

“You honor me with your compliments, Your Excellency.”

Phoebe gave a prim and proper reply, but Rock knew that was just to hide how shy he was to receive a compliment.

“I told you it would be delicious. Father is an amazing cook,” Rock declared proudly.

Phoebe grew even shier and looked away, earning an amused smile from Ebel.

“I couldn’t have said it better myself. There is nothing better than delicious food served at a lively dining table.”

Rock didn’t know how Ebel normally took his food. He was the last Mateus alive and had only a handful of servants, resulting in what must’ve been quiet mealtimes—well, maybe not with Johanna there.

Since the maid came to mind, Rock decided to ask after her.

“Are Johanna—and the others—feeling better?”

“Yes, thank you for asking.” Relief clearly showed on Ebel’s face as he nodded. “Their injuries have healed, and everyone’s finally getting back to their normal routines. House repairs are also underway. There’s nothing for you to worry about.”

“Really? I’m glad to hear that...”

Rock was especially worried about Johanna, the maid close to her own age. She must’ve been left with such a scary memory after the incident with Guido Linus and had been physically injured too. It wouldn’t have been strange for her to take some time off, but she’d kept working at Mateus Manor like nothing had happened. Perhaps she was tougher than Rock gave her credit for.

“Speaking of Johanna, she wanted me to invite you over,” Ebel said as if he’d just remembered the maid’s request. “Apparently, she’d like to serve you again since she couldn’t treat you to a good meal during your last visit. She incessantly badgered me to bring you home.”

“Should a maid *be* badgering her lord...?”

Phoebe sounded exasperated with them, but Ebel didn’t seem to mind at all. He calmly countered Phoebe’s snide remark.

“Johanna is a hard worker with a good heart. I often haven’t a clue what she’s saying, but I have no complaint aside from that.”

Apparently, even the count who’d hired her didn’t understand a lick of what Johanna was saying when she rattled on with stars in her eyes. Rock fully agreed with him on her pleasant personality and was also intrigued by how fancy a feast held at Count Mateus’s house might be.

“So, how does a dinner party at my house next time sound?”

Rock accepted without hesitation when Ebel extended a formal offer.

“I would love to. I’ll come with my father.”

“Me?!” Phoebe let out a rare flustered groan.

“You don’t want to, Father?”

“I’m not against it, but...it’ll be a headache deciding what to wear. We’d be going to a count’s mansion!”

“Why not wear the same thing you did last time?”

Phoebe looked bothered by Rock’s suggestion. Perhaps he was opposed to wearing a dress when officially accompanying Rock as her father.

“Dress the way you feel most comfortable. It’s not a formal dinner,” Ebel said. Then his golden eyes gleamed mischievously. “But I must say I am extremely interested in how two tailors will dress up for the occasion.”

Both Phoebe and Rock suddenly felt pressured to find the right thing to wear when they heard that.

By the time they’d mostly finished dinner and had started on their after-

dinner fruit, their conversation took on a serious air.

“How is Lord Linus faring?”

Rock felt like she was touching an old wound when she brought up his name. Ebel’s expression briefly darkened, his fingers freezing around a pomegranate aril. He immediately strained out a smile and quietly answered.

“He’s calmed down some, according to Michaela. She said he spent the first few days holed up in his room but has recently been joining her for walks in the garden.” Ebel brought the aril to his mouth and continued after he savored it. “But...he will need time to get used to being a werewolf, I’m sure.”

“Yes, it can’t be easy...” Rock responded with a lighter tone than the complicated feelings she actually had. After all, she knew even Ebel hadn’t happily accepted that fate.

“I’ve been going through my contacts to find out anything I can about those statues,” Phoebe said in a quiet voice as he peeled an apricot. “Sadly, I haven’t gotten any good leads.”

Rock knew that her father was collecting information on the cursed statues.

Unfortunately, they hadn’t found any since Guido’s. At least Lady Trilian promised to contact them if anyone sold her another one, but Rock doubted they’d find more just waiting for it to come to them.

Oddly enough, what seemed like an endless deluge of hearing about one statue after another had now dried up completely, like a storm had passed.

“I haven’t had any luck either. I’m still visiting antique dealers in hopes of finding one.”

Ebel had sighed, but urgency had yet to enter his voice or facial expression. Perhaps he also sensed it—that when the time came, the statues would surely reappear in front of him. Like fate.

“Please don’t push yourself past your limits, Ebel.”

Rock could only worry about him.

“Thank you, Roxy.”

Ebel flashed her a delighted smile while Phoebe made a face.

“What’s this, Roxy? You care *only* about His Excellency?”

“What’re you talking about? I’m worried about you too, Father. Obviously.” Rock laughed then continued, as if to remind herself. “The same goes for me. We need to stay healthy and energized at all times if we want to take on supernatural curses and the like.”

The curse strikes when you’re at your weakest, she thought.

They learned that from Guido’s experience.

“True. We’ll get the jump on it next time,” Phoebe declared, as if challenging the curse. Ebel nodded alongside him.

“At least I’m not alone. I’m very grateful for that.”

Rock felt the exact same way.

She wasn’t alone, so she wasn’t going to lose to some curse.



AFTER dinner, Ebel and Rock said their goodbyes to Phoebe, as they were both heading out to their respective homes in the aristocrat district and the slums. Phoebe saw them off with a smile and—

“Your Excellency, I humbly request that you see my daughter home *untouched*.”

—a touch of his usual sarcasm, making sure to drive his point home.

Ebel parried his quibble in the same vein.

“Don’t you worry, I shall keep unscrupulous fellows far away from her.”

Rock had a rejoinder of her own but wisely kept silent.

The sun had set, and flames danced inside the oil streetlights dotting the sidewalks.

The slums were a distorted, lawless corner of the imperial capital. People who were forced out of the capital for lack of citizenship had constructed shacks on the capital’s outskirts, starting the initial foundation of what eventually became

the slums. As the shacks grew in size and number, even the House of Lords and the emperor couldn't ignore their existence.

Thus, streetlights were put up along the intertwining alleyways, low-quality housing was constructed, and the constables patrolled the roads, albeit lazily. Some said that one day the walls surrounding the imperial capital would be destroyed, and the slums would be incorporated into the capital as another district. Others feared that the emperor would send troops into the shantytown to carry out a clean-up operation.

Whatever the future might hold, people still lived on these overcrowded gloomy streets, and warm light filled the windows of their rundown houses.

"I had fun tonight," Ebel told Rock as they walked down the dimly lit street.

"I'm glad you enjoyed yourself."

The corners around Ebel's eyes softened when Rock smiled at him.

"I would love to hear tales of your father's adventures when I have the opportunity to visit his home again."

"Please *do* ask him about it. His stories are so riveting," Rock boasted, as if talking about herself. Then she bashfully told him, "...To tell you the truth, he asked me to live with him."

"As father and daughter?"

"Yes. He said he wants to live together as long as we still can, since we went so long not being part of each other's lives."

After she said that, Rock suddenly realized Phoebe had said that because he was planning for a future where she'd move away. It was only natural for a child to eventually move out to live their life, but it was embarrassing to say such a thing to Ebel, given their relationship.

"What might happen in the future plays less of a part in my decision than wanting to be a good daughter," Rock quickly amended, lest Ebel misunderstand.

"I see." Ebel chuckled, hinting he knew what she was trying to beat around the bush about. Then, his expression softened. "I think it's a great idea. Family

should be together as long as they can.” His voice darkened as he muttered, “I can’t be a good son now even if I want to be...”

Rock gasped and pressed her lips together.

She stole a peek at his face beside her. His eyes were staring off into the distance.

Rock only knew what Ebel had told her about his father. She often wanted to ask him about what kind of man his father was and what their relationship had been like. But she felt like those were old wounds for him, and she didn’t want to go poking at them.

They walked for a while in silence.

Rock’s apartment wasn’t that far from Phoebe’s. Whether they spent the time chatting or walking in silence, they would arrive in no time. At the end of the road, where the streetlight flames swayed, Rock saw the storefront of the familiar antique shop and immediately wanted to extend their time together.

She stopped in the middle of the road and timidly offered, “Um...would you like to come up for tea?”

Ebel stopped in sync with her, his expression puzzled.

“How should I interpret your invitation, Rock?”

“I-I didn’t mean anything by it! I just wanted to offer you tea!” Rock insisted, but her voice cracked, betraying her intentions.

Ebel’s golden eyes gleamed in the night, seeing right through her. His gaze accelerated her embarrassment.

“You don’t *have* to...if you don’t want to...”

Was that move too bold...? Rock wondered, doubting her decision.

Ebel slowly leaned toward her. Her breath caught in her throat as his shadow cast on her face.

“Your offer is most tempting,” he whispered in her ear. “But you have a guest to deal with first.”

Rock’s head shot up at that unexpected answer.

Ebel's golden eyes were fastened on the road ahead. Someone was standing in front of the spiral staircase leading to Rock's room beside Lady Trilian's shop.

It was the silver-haired tailor, Krister Gionet.

"Hey, Rock. Thanks for your help this afternoon," Krister casually greeted her. His eyes widened when he saw she was with someone, but he immediately cracked a smile when he recognized the face. "Oooh! You're still with my gallant hero!"

"Hero...?"

"You saved me this afternoon, remember? Thank you very much, Count Mateus!"

Krister stuck out his hand toward Ebel. Ebel answered him with a smile that didn't leave his lips.

"I only did what anyone else would have. By the way...why *are* you here?"

Rock snuck in a glance at Ebel to find his golden eyes weren't smiling at all. Whether Krister realized that or not, he replied with a toothy grin.

"To offer my thanks for this afternoon, Your Excellency."

"To thank me?"

"Nay. I am a lowborn man of the slums, and you are a noble and highborn count. I'm too lacking to even dare offer a meager word of thanks to someone so great, which is why I came to bring my overflowing words of gratitude to your acquaintance, Rock Floria!" Krister spouted pleasantries as he gripped Ebel's hand. His theatrical display made him look drunk on his own words.

Rock's opinion of Krister grew frostier the more he kept speechifying.

As a saleswoman, Rock was accustomed to using some flattery on her customers. But Krister's word choice was overly embellished and deliberate, having the opposite effect of putting the person off.

Case in point, the corners of Ebel's lips were twitching. He seemed to be trying not to let his displeasure show.

Even Rock wanted this nuisance to hurry up and get lost.

“We don’t need your empty thanks, Krister,” Rock said curtly to get rid of him. She pried Ebel’s hand free of Krister’s and purposely treated him coldly. “You’re only being a nuisance, coming at this hour. Go home.”

“What the hell? And here I was tryin’ to bring you a good job.” Krister leaned forward and lowered his voice suggestively. “You okay if I just leave and take one of your favorite things away: the chance to make good money?”

Rock was always up for a good business deal, but she trusted Krister less than she loved money.

Phoebe often said, “The better a job sounds, the bigger of a catch it has.”

“I’m not interested in any jobs coming from you.”

Krister seemed unfazed by Rock’s glare.

“Don’t be that way, buddy! I’ll introduce ya to my customers.”

“Why would you do that?”

“To tell ya the truth, I’ve been busy handlin’ a huge order from a wealthy customer.”

The way he bragged about it only incensed Rock further.

“So, I’ve been turnin’ down most of my regulars, and I still can’t keep up with all the work. I’ll start sending all my other customers your way.”

What’s more, he was even acting like he was doing Rock a favor when he was really just making her life more difficult.

“No good will come from dealing with *your* customers,” Rock snapped back.

Krister didn’t even seem to hear her.

“Don’t hold back on my account. Now ya know what’s up, so handle the rest on your own!” he announced and turned on his heel, hot-footing it away from them.

“Hey! Krister!”

Krister didn’t look back even when Rock shouted after him, disappearing into the black of night faster than a sewer rat fleeing a hungry cat.

Basically, he'd come to push all his problems onto his rival.

"There he goes, making my life difficult...!" Rock groaned, but there wasn't much she could do after he'd left.

As it was, she wouldn't be able to make a profit off of his customers, so she'd be turning them away at the door anyway. She wanted nothing to do with bad customers who'd complain about the price, comparing it to Krister's, only to get the evil eye from Phoebe until they ran away with their tail between their legs, cursing her business.

"He isn't trustworthy, is he?" Ebel asked, frowning.

"That he is not. Anyone coming by way of his introduction isn't worth doing business with."

Rock sighed, but Ebel meant his question another way.

"I'm more bothered by the man himself. Did you see his eyes? They were bloodshot and his face was withdrawn."

Rock didn't notice since she was trying not to look at Krister's annoying face. He did say he was busy working on a huge order.

"I'm most concerned that he knows where you live."

"Ah, now that you mention it..."

Rock had no personal relationship with Krister beyond knowing his face and name as a business rival. She doubted he felt as fondly of her as his attitude had implied, and Rock would turn right around and leave if she saw him eating at Justia's bakery when she meant to go inside.

So it was more than a little strange for Krister to visit her house.

"...How *did* he know where I live?" Rock tilted her head, puzzled.

"Want me to tail him?" Ebel quietly offered.

"Tail Krister?"

"Yes, I'll sniff out the details. He might bring trouble to your door after all."

Krister had already dropped a bucket full of trouble on her, but Ebel's concerns seemed to lie elsewhere.

“That’s dangerous! There’s no reason for you to go so far—”

Rock tried to stop him, but Ebel only smiled before leaping onto her rooftop from the road below. He turned around after he softly landed and nodded down at her.

“You needn’t worry. I’ll stay in the shadows.”

“B-But you don’t have to do that, Ebel!”

“I do for you, Rock Floria,” Ebel said, winking at her. “I’m off! I’ll let you know right away if anything comes up.”

Ebel took off at a run without waiting for her answer.

Rock’s eyes followed him as he nimbly leaped from rooftop to rooftop. She was swamped with loneliness the moment he was out of sight and sighed.

“Damn you, Krister...” she cursed.

Her first chance at a date with Ebel after everything they’d been through was ruined by her obnoxious rival.

I worked up so much courage to invite him in, too...

This was the moment Rock’s opinion of Krister dropped as low as it could go, and then some.

Rock’s restlessness continued for hours.

Ebel didn’t return that night. He said he’d let her know if anything happened. Maybe he’d just gone home without incident, but with how suspicious Krister was acting, she was worried. She wished she’d asked him to stop by no matter what after he finished.

She rolled over and over in bed, wasting the night away tormented by sadness and apprehension.

In the end, Ebel came knocking at her door just past dawn the next day. Rock flew to the door as soon as his knuckles hit the wood, already dressed after a restless night.

“My apologies for returning so late.”

Ebel looked awfully tired himself when Rock opened the door. Unable to bear

seeing him that way, she invited him inside before questioning him.

“Don’t tell me you’ve been at Krister’s until now?”

“I was,” Ebel confirmed, tired and annoyed. “I followed him home. He’s a more industrious man than I gave him credit for. He was tailoring all night long.”

“Krister was? I don’t believe it!”

Rock couldn’t believe her ears.

If he was such a hard worker, he wouldn’t get into scuffles like the one from yesterday, she thought.

“It’s true. Though his work was far from thorough...” Ebel started, then continued in a more serious tone. “I spied on him through the window. He was cutting large quantities of blue fabric and sewing them one by one with needle and thread. His huge order seems to be real as he appeared to be making clothes of the same design. He was at his work table the whole time from when he came home until day broke.”

Apparently, Krister really *was* busy with work. Such a big order must have come from some factory asking for uniforms or some such.

Rock felt a tad jealous that he’d landed a profitable job she hadn’t.

“I planned to leave once he slept, but since that never happened, I ended up there longer than I wanted.”

Ebel shrugged. So that was why he hadn’t returned until after dawn.

Knowing why brought relief but also made her want to sulk.

“I was worried because I didn’t hear from you.”

Rock’s pursed lips caused Ebel’s sleepy eyes to widen.

“Really? I guess I should’ve said I would drop by even if nothing happened.”

“Yes, you should have! You went too far, even *if* it was for my sake! If you hadn’t come this morning, I would’ve spent the whole day worrying about you to the point I couldn’t get a lick of work done!”

Her voice grew angry out of real concern for him, but it only made a delighted smile blossom on his tired face.

“You were *that* worried about me, Roxy?”

As he spoke, his hand wrapped around Rock’s back, pulling her to his chest. Still pouting, she put up a measly struggle until his warmth instantly took the fight out of her.

“I was...worried... I always am.”

“I see. Thank you. I’m happy to know that.”

“What’s even worse is that you spent the whole night with *him* instead of me...”

Her bout of unreasonable jealousy finally got a laugh out of him.

“I also think I did something truly regrettable. I wasted a much-awaited invitation to tea from you.” Ebel brought his face close to hers and spoke with a serious gleam in his eyes, as if making a binding oath. “I swear I will make this up to you.”

“...It’s a promise.”

“It is.”

He sealed it with a kiss.

After sharing two, then three, brief kisses, he gave her a tight hug as if he were loath to leave.

“I only hope this doesn’t negatively affect your work.”

“Don’t worry. You helped reenergize me some,” Rock whispered into his broad chest.

Maybe she was too easy to please, but her sleepiness went right out the window the moment she knew he was safe.



AFTER that, Rock saw Ebel off as he left for home.

Then she headed to her shop, where a whole bunch of unwelcome customers came in droves after she opened her doors—as she feared.

“Krister Gionet told me to come here.”

The lowest of the low came crawling out of the slums into Floria Clothes Shop as if they had conspired together to do so beforehand. Their orders varied from cheap custom-made pieces to the purchase of ready-made garments, but whenever Rock told them the price, they looked uniformly dissatisfied.

“Krister doesn’t charge that much!”

“This is our standard price. We won’t keep a tab or give discounts either,” Rock decisively stood up to the customers’ dissatisfaction—she wasn’t going to undercut herself. “Of course, we confidently guarantee the quality of your purchase.”

“Ya talk big for a little brat. Yer ripping me off, aren’t ya?!”

As for the customers who started throwing around threats, Phoebe would roll up his sleeves and show them out—peacefully or by force. Anyone who dared badmouth him found themselves chucked out the door the next second, yelping in pain. Thanks to him, Rock wasn’t directly harmed.

Her shop, however, suffered huge losses just by having that sort of customer lined up out front.

In addition to wasting her valuable time, they scared away decent customers who actually paid.

“...What the bloody hell?! They’re obstructing business!”

Phoebe was reasonably annoyed by having to deal with dozens of unwelcome customers all morning. Complaints flew left and right from his rouged lips.

“Damn Krister! You sure that little punk isn’t lying about being busy? What’s the big idea, sending all his trash our way?!”

“But His Excellency saw him working through the night.”

Rock had already told Phoebe all about her run-in with Krister the prior night. They could complain all they wanted, and it still wouldn’t get them out of this one.

“My little girl is the better tailor by a mile! That customer must be a crazy cheapskate to place an order with that bastard instead of you!” Phoebe huffed in an indignant tone, his parental bias showing. “I can’t stand for this a minute

longer! Let's go take our complaints directly to the perpetrator!"

"That's not a bad idea. Our shop is doomed if this keeps up any longer."

Rock was all for it.

It was really going to damage business if she couldn't get him to at least stop sending his nastiest customers her way.



ROCK and Phoebe closed up shop just before nightfall and headed for Hawker Square on Market Street. That was where Krister usually set up his stall. They searched for their frustrating business rival in a frenzy but couldn't find him for some reason.

"Krister? He packed up his things just past noon," another stall keeper told them. He seemed surprised by it too. "He almost always hawks his wares, even if he has to set up in the middle of the road. He seemed distracted and closed early today."

"...I wonder if he got the jump on us," Rock whispered in Phoebe's ear.

"You got away this time, Krister," he snorted. "Tomorrow, you won't be so lucky!"

They returned to the shop discouraged, vowing to get vengeance the next day.

But Rock and Phoebe never got a chance to level Krister with their complaints.

Despite visiting Hawker Square every day for a week, they never saw the silver-haired tailor again.



"WHERE'D he run off to...?" Rock grumbled, wearily resting her cheek on her arms on top of the table at the bakery located on the first floor of the public bathhouse.

A whole week had passed without any signs of Krister. Rock and Phoebe spent every free moment they had searching for him along Market Street and Hawker

Square. They tried changing the time they searched from evening to early morning to late afternoon to no avail.

If that wasn't bad enough, even the other street vendors at Hawker Square told them they hadn't seen him either.

"Never expected him to be the type to hole up without making coin on the side." Phoebe's shoulders drooped with exhaustion. He was fed up with searching too. "And here I had grand plans of wringing his little neck next time I saw his ugly mug."

"He's not staying out of sight just to avoid us, is he?"

"Isn't he just busy filling that big fat order of his?"

Rock and Phoebe were tired of him outstepping them at every corner, and griping about him became a part of their daily routine.

Floria Clothes Shop was bustling with business every day, even after Krister's disappearance.

Of course, not all of the customers were the welcome type, and there was an endless supply of hagglers trying to knock down Rock's prices. It was becoming commonplace to get an earful or be threatened when she told them her standard pricing.

But as the days went on, the new customers had a definite change in attitude. For the first three days, they came saying "Krister recommended you," but since the day before yesterday, they'd started saying "I've got no choice but to shop here, since I can't find Krister anymore." Rock found that reasoning just as annoying, but she also found the whole thing strange.

Did Krister *really* have such a big order he couldn't open up shop for a whole week? Was it *really* just work that was keeping him from being found?

Rock was beginning to have doubts.

"What's got you two so down?" a cheerful voice asked Rock and Phoebe. "You must be depressed because you're hungry. C'mon, eat up!"

Justia appeared with a pile of potato bread.

The smell of freshly baked bread breathed some life back into Rock. Her

stomach immediately stated it was hungry, and she sank her teeth into a roll with delight.

Seeing that brought Phoebe back on point, and he questioned Justia as she was walking away.

“Justia, have you seen that punk Krister?”

Justia stopped and gave him a blank look.

“Krister? Now that you mention it, I *haven't* seen him around lately.” Then she called out to her husband, who was standing in front of the oven. “Cargus! Do you remember how long it’s been since he last came?”

Her taciturn husband didn’t turn around but answered on the spot. “He hasn’t been here in a week or so.”

“A week...it fits.”

That matched exactly with when he’d disappeared.

“He makes himself known when he comes, always asking for our unsellable bread or to give him a loaf for free since he’s a regular.” Justia scrunched up her nose. “That’s why I decided to never buy anything from him. Someone who doesn’t know the value of things can’t be selling anything of quality.”

Thankfully, Justia was a regular at Floria Clothes Shop. Her words were truly encouraging and healing for Rock, who’d become exhausted from the last few days’ craziness.

“Come by the next time you want a new apron. I’ll make you another good one,” Rock said, hoping to convey her gratitude.

“With your tailoring work, I rarely have to buy another,” Justia replied with a hearty laugh.

“That’s because we’re a high-quality shop,” Phoebe boasted, getting a laugh out of Rock next.

However, Krister’s whereabouts remained a mystery.

If he wasn’t showing up at his usual haunts, then that’d mean he was devoting everything to his work at the expense of sleeping and eating.

“So, why’re you asking about Krister?”

Rock and Phoebe explained the situation to Justia as they ate their bread. After they detailed everything from his disappearance to him dumping his worst customers on Rock, Justia gave them a sympathetic smile.

“That sounds like a headache to deal with.”

“Tell me about it. He’s making real trouble for us.”

“But it’s unusual for him to take time off work,” Justia said thoughtfully.

Everyone knew Krister’s obsession with making money. It was only natural for them to find it strange for him not to be out hawking his shoddy wares.

“He said he’s busy with a specific job.”

Rock heaved a heavy sigh. She was haunted by this vague sense of unease.

A woman just so happened to enter the bakery while they were talking.

She was a woman with brown skin, which was rare in these parts. Rock had heard stories about a territory far to the south of the capital, where it was summer all year long, and that’s where people who looked like her resided. Looks aside, she was someone Rock had never seen before.

Even if Rock didn’t recognize her, she was able to get a general idea about her profession. Her richly colored dress had a deep plunging U-neck, and the hem was short enough to see her knees. Heavy makeup drew attention to her exotic facial features in direct contrast with her short black hair, which sported a casual cut.

Ninety percent of women with those looks worked at the pubs. They never came on to Rock because she looked like a poor young man, but they did have a tendency to tease her. Maybe because they thought she was the innocent and shy type. That was why Rock tried to avoid them.

The woman neither searched for a seat nor sat down and instead made a beeline for Rock’s table. Once she arrived, her scarlet lips pulled up in a smile.

“You were just talking about Krister, weren’t you, boy?” she asked. “Do you know him?”

Rock was already twenty years old, even if her male attire made her look puny for her age. She was understandably put off by being called “boy.” And besides that, she wondered who the other woman even was.

“I know him... Who are you?” Rock returned her question with a question just as Justia frowned.

“Nisha, no shopping for customers in my store.”

“I’m not *trying* to. I just wanted to talk to this kid here.”

The woman called Nisha pointed at Rock without an ounce of shame.

“Rock’s got no experience. Don’t pick on him,” Justia enjoined, worriedly returning to her work.

Nisha promptly sat right beside Rock without asking.

“We didn’t say you could sit with us,” Phoebe warned, not hiding his wariness of her. Nisha jumped in her seat.

“Your voice! You’re a man?! Why in the blazes are you dressed like *that*?”

“Because I *like* to dress this way, thank you very much.”

Phoebe’s scowl deepened.

“Hmm...*you’re* weird,” Nisha muttered, not the least bit apologetic.

Apparently, this woman had no manners.

It wasn’t uncommon for Phoebe to be ridiculed and scorned. But still, Rock wanted to expose him to as little of that nastiness as possible. His life choices were none of their business anyway.

So, Rock decided to take a harsher approach with her.

“Um, Nisha, was it? We’re in the middle of a meal. Do you mind?”

“I won’t get in your way. Go ahead and eat.” Nisha didn’t get the hint. She batted her lashes at Rock. “Anyway, won’t you answer me? Do you know Krister?”

She rested her elbows, and her breasts as well, on the table. She casually pressed her bare upper arms against Rock’s.

“Your name...was Rock, right? You’ve got *such* a pretty face...and a manly name to boot,” Nisha whispered with a seductive expression, putting her seduction skills on display.

It didn’t matter how skilled she was—it wasn’t going to work on Rock.

“There’s no one in the slums who doesn’t know him,” Rock answered calmly. Nisha blinked as if that was news to her.

“Really? Then that means Krister is *famous!*”

“...It’s my turn to ask a question. Who are you?”

“I’m Krister’s lover,” she answered without hesitation.

Rock was startled by her answer.

If that was true, then she should know where he was. Now Rock could finally lay into the rotten tailor.

“I haven’t seen him around lately,” Phoebe immediately joined in, drawing the same conclusion as Rock. “What’s he up to?”

Nisha cocked her head. “I don’t know. I haven’t seen him in forever either.”

“How long is ‘forever?’”

“About a fortnight, I think. Haven’t seen him since he said he’d be too busy with work to meet up for a while.” Displeased, she moved in a way that made her body jiggle in all the right places. “Krister said he’d be too busy to go on dates. But he’s been neglecting me too much for that! He hasn’t even come by the shop lately!”

Every time she squirmed in her chair, her layered bracelets chimed as they hit each other. They were handcrafted bracelets made of shells, beads, and little gemstones.

“Aren’t you lovers? Why not visit him at home?” Phoebe pointed out, seemingly hitting a sore spot for her.

“I don’t know where he lives! We always met at my place or at work.”

Phoebe looked like he had a whole lot he wanted to say about that, but he bit his tongue. Meanwhile, Nisha closed what little distance was left with Rock.

“Do you know where Krister lives?”

“I don’t. We aren’t close.”

Rock shook her head.

Whether he was the secretive type or not, Krister hadn’t even told Nisha where he lived.

He’d stopped setting up shop on Market Street, where he made his living, and even his lover didn’t know his address. It wasn’t going to be easy to get a hold of his whereabouts now.

But his sudden disappearance seemed an awful lot to Rock like he was running from something.

A man who always made his presence known went a full week without being seen by anyone. Something was strange, even if he was just confining himself indoors for work.

“Let me know if you see Krister.” Those were Nisha’s first and only sincere words. “It’s important to make money, but I’m lonely when he doesn’t come to see me. Besides, I worry when he doesn’t show up to let me know he’s alive and well.”

“All right. I’ll let him know if I see him,” Rock agreed, sympathizing with her.

Phoebe stared closely at Rock. But he said nothing as he munched on his bread in silence.

“Thank you, boy.”

Nisha smiled sweetly and took Rock’s hand in hers. Her soft hands closed over Rock’s. She was probably trying to convey her gratitude, but the suddenness of it made Rock uncomfortable.

“Nisha?”

Nisha also seemed puzzled despite being the one who initiated the touch.

“Your hand...”

“What about it?”

“Nothing, I just thought it felt calloused like Krister’s.”

Nisha gently pressed down on Rock's calloused middle finger with the pad of her fingers.



Callouses were an inevitable part of sewing, and Rock had a few on the back of her middle finger and in the palm of her hand. Her mother Vale had had them in almost the same spots, and it made Rock happy to know her hands were coming to resemble her mother's.

"Are you also a tailor, boy?"

Rock was surprised by her question.

"You can tell just by looking at my hand? That's incredible!"

"My job consists of looking at men's hands," she said, releasing Rock's hand and standing from the table. "See you next time, Rock. Make sure to tell Krister about me if you run into him."

She sashayed out of the hash house without ordering anything.

"Krister has a lover, huh...?" Rock muttered shortly after Nisha departed. "He's a real jerk, leaving his lover in the dark for a fortnight."

"If she's *actually* his lover, that is," Phoebe quietly insinuated.

"What's that supposed to mean? You think Nisha's lying?"

"I don't." Phoebe softly shook his head. "I'm saying Krister might not view her that way." Then he shrugged. "That girl hasn't been in the capital long. I haven't seen her around, and she knew nothing about you or me. It's painfully common for girls from the countryside to be trapped and snared by city boys."

Phoebe's explanation was strangely convincing. But not wanting to accept that was true, Rock argued back.

"You don't know that. Krister could feel the same for her too."

"If he did, he would've told her where he lives, especially when he can't see her for a while."

"I...guess so, but—"

"Not telling her the truth shows where his feelings are at. Period," Phoebe declared flatly, a hint of sadness edging into his features.

Even Rock knew Phoebe had a valid point. But knowing something and accepting it are two different things.

“I’d rather see things in a more positive light...” Rock mumbled, getting a look out of Phoebe like he saw right through her.

“What’s this, Rock? Do you see yourself in her? Hmm?”

“WHAT?! N-No way!”

“You just saw him a *week* ago, silly!”

Her father saw through her lies.

For a woman in love, a week can feel like an eternity.

Rock also had no time to go on dates. Work had been hectic lately, and she wasn’t making much progress on the court uniform Ebel had ordered from her. She couldn’t summon him to her shop until she got it to a certain stage.

Hence why Nisha’s sadness hit close to home, and Rock had vowed to tell Krister the moment she saw him.



ANOTHER week had passed.

Missing person posters had been put up around the slums. Nisha had posted them.

And naturally, the missing person was Krister Gionet.

👑 Chapter 2: A Pledge for the Future

ROCK and Phoebe were taken by surprise when Nisha visited Floria Clothes Shop. Nisha didn't seem to know this was their shop either. She absently looked around before holding out a piece of paper from the pile she was clutching.

"You're...Rock, right? Can I trouble you to put this up?"

The paper was one of the missing person posters they had seen around town.

The poster clearly read:

Missing: Krister Gionet

28-year-old male

Slender, silver hair, charcoal-black eyes

The text was accompanied by a professionally drawn portrait of Krister that perfectly captured his features. Just having that drawn must have cost a small fortune, but Nisha didn't stop there—she'd had dozens of the posters made.

The bottom of the page was signed "NiShA" with the sloppy handwriting of a child just learning how to write their name.

These posters had already been hung up all around the slums. Rock had spotted one on her way to the shop that very morning.

Rock lifted her eyes from Krister's portrait to look at Nisha.

Her cheeks were sunken in, her eyes red and swollen from crying, and her lips paler than when Rock had met her a week ago at Justia's. She was clearly haggard from worry caused by Krister's disappearance, no doubt.

"Sure. I'll put it up outside," Rock agreed.

Nisha forced a miserable smile and asked, "Have you seen Krister yet?"

"Sadly, no."

After being given the runaround all week, Rock had given up looking for him. But she could easily tell he was still missing from his customers knocking at her door to this day.

“I see... I hope nothing bad happened to him...” Nisha’s lips trembled and she cast down her eyes. “I don’t even know if he’s still in the capital. And everyone says they don’t know where he lives.”

Going two whole weeks without being seen was too long by all accounts. And it was almost a month since Nisha last saw him. Rumors were even starting to spread that he’d skipped town for some reason or another.

“You have no idea what he’s gotten himself into?” Phoebe asked her, unable to just watch.

Nisha feebly shook her head. “None whatsoever. I never thought he’d disappear from my life.”

Her heartrending whisper struck a chord with Rock.

She must be in so much pain to think that way. Especially when the cause of all her heartache is the man she loves...

“Did he mention anything about that big job of his?” Phoebe asked, digging deeper.

Nisha furrowed her brow as she tried to remember anything of use, only to droop her shoulders.

“I don’t think so. Krister rarely talks about work.” Tears formed in her eyes and she sniffled. “All he said was that he’s going to make big money off it.”

“‘Big money,’ huh? Just how big is that?”

“He said once everything was over, he’d take me back to my hometown.” Tears slipped down Nisha’s cheeks, the conversation pushing her over the edge. “He promised to go south with me to meet my family and get married.”

Phoebe shot Rock a look like his case was proven then and there.

There could be more than just that to explain his disappearance. Rock could only watch Nisha cry in silence.

After Nisha left the shop, Rock penned a letter to Ebel in the aristocrat district. She'd finally finished basting the court uniform he'd ordered, so she requested he come to her shop for a fitting.

She debated whether she should bring up Krister. She preferred not to put bad news into her letter to Ebel. But he was certain to see those posters on his way there.

So, after going back and forth with herself, she finally added: *"Krister Gionet hasn't shown up since that night. If you still remember where he lives, may I ask for your help in finding him?"*



THE day after the postman delivered Rock's letter, Ebel arrived at her shop before his reply. He likely saw the poster hanging outside the shop, since his expression was harder than usual when he set foot inside.

"He went missing?" Ebel asked Rock as she helped him into the basted court uniform in the fitting room.

"It seems that way," Rock confirmed, then continued, "I haven't seen him once since that night he appeared in front of my apartment. From what I gather, no one else has seen him since that following afternoon either."

"Hrm... What's the reason for his disappearance?"

"No one knows..." Rock held the tailcoat out to Ebel while shaking her head.

He slid his arms through the sleeves with practiced ease, then frowned.

"No one knows? He just up and disappeared then?"

"Yes. It's not even clear if he left of his own will, got involved in some bad business, or is just hiding somewhere nearby."

As she spoke, Rock circled behind Ebel and gently straightened his collar. His court uniform seemed perfectly tailored to his exact measurements. Now she just had to do the final stitching. But she wanted to resolve her concerns before that.

"It's just that Nisha—Krister's lover—seems really miserable."

Ebel looked at her over his shoulder at the mention of that name. “Nisha... that’s the signature on the posters, right?”

“Yes. She’s been putting posters up all over the slums.”

—to find her lover.

Or at least that’s what Rock believed without a doubt. Phoebe, on the other hand, had a different opinion.

“So far, it’s just Nisha calling herself his lover,” his annoyed voice grumbled outside the fitting room. “There’s a chance he ran for it when talks of marriage came up.”

“That’s too cruel, Phoebe. Why would he run from marriage?” Rock argued from inside the fitting room, getting an exaggerated sigh in return.

“Not everyone willingly *wants* to get married. You’re still too naïve in that department, Rock.”

He had a point there. Rock was only twenty years old, an age where many still have fanciful dreams and high hopes about marriage.

Neither of them knew what Krister and Nisha’s relationship was actually like. But was it really so unreasonable for Rock to take Nisha’s side after seeing her cry?

“What do you think, Ebel?” Rock drew him into the conversation. Ebel quietly smiled in his full court uniform.

“When it comes to marriage, I swear I won’t dash your hopes and dreams.” Rock blinked up at him. His expression turned serious as he continued, “As for Krister, I can’t comment without more information.”

“I suppose so...”

“But we need to find out more.” Ebel’s golden eyes narrowed warily. “If there’s foul play involved, the danger needs to be removed. This is where you live, after all.”

Rock gazed up at his handsome face as relief quietly washed over her.

There is no greater blessing than having people you can rely on in life. In that

respect, Rock was truly blessed.

Rock served Ebel tea after he removed his court uniform and exited the fitting room.

“It’s cheap tea, so I hope it doesn’t offend your tastes,” she warned in advance.

The count didn’t hesitate to take a sip and savor it before flashing her a bright smile.

“It’s delicious. Thank you.”

“I’m glad you like it. Phoebe made it for you,” Rock added, relieved he liked it. Ebel, however, gagged.

Phoebe’s scarlet lips curled up at the corners.

“Oh dear, you don’t like it if I made it, Your Excellency?”

“...I would never...think that way.” Ebel elegantly wiped his lips with a handkerchief. Then he faced Rock with a more serious air about him. “In your letter, you asked if I remember where Krister lives, yes?”

“Yes. To tell you the truth, not even Nisha knows where he lives.”

Since no one knew where Krister lived, no one could visit his home to confirm his safety.

Perhaps he was still burning the midnight oil working at home. Or it was equally possible he was passed out on the floor. Rock had no trouble imagining him unconscious and unable to call for help.

“It might be hard for you to remember since you followed him over two weeks ago...” Rock continued, uncertain if she was asking too much. Ebel did indeed furrow his brows.

“Honestly, I can’t confidently say I *do* remember...”

It didn’t help that Ebel was only tailing Krister and not trying to remember the way there. Plus, this was the slums: a shantytown where shacks were built upon shacks, and the alleyways changed shape by the day. Even if he remembered the path he took that day, there was no guarantee following it would get him to

the same place today.

“But I don’t want to say ‘I can’t’ in front of you.” Ebel winked at Rock, deciding to do it. “Let’s search for his house, relying on what I can remember.”

“Thank you very much, Ebel.” Rock bowed to convey her gratitude.

“I’ll come too then,” Phoebe immediately added his name to the search party.

“It never hurts to have more people.”

“That’s true. We don’t know what’s waiting for us, after all,” Ebel agreed, seemingly expecting the worse.

It wasn’t farfetched to assume Krister got himself caught up in some kind of trouble here, where crime was more common than three meals a day. Rock’s slender arms weren’t much good in a fight, so it was reassuring to have Phoebe come along.

“I don’t give a damn about that bastard’s wellbeing,” Phoebe stressed. “Frankly, I couldn’t care less if Krister ran for it or got whisked away by some evil fae. I’m interested in one thing and one thing only: the big job he got.”

Now that he mentioned it, Phoebe had only asked Nisha questions about the job Krister received.

“Do you think that’s the reason Krister went missing?” Rock asked.

“I’m thinking it very possibly is.” Phoebe stroked his smooth chin. “It pays so well he was willing to sacrifice all his other work for it. And this is that greedy bastard Krister we’re talking about. Work like that is about as common in the slums as finding gold on the streets.”

Rock was curious about who’d hired Krister for this high-paying job as well. She thought it came from a factory or the like because he was making clothes with the same exact shape and design, but there hadn’t been any news of such a facility opening up in these parts. Perhaps the job came from outside the slums.

“If that is the case, then we can’t pretend like it’s not our problem.” Phoebe looked closely at Rock’s face this time. “The same customer might show up at our shop next. Dangerous seeds should be squashed before they can sprout,

right?”

“I can’t disagree with you there.”

Rock was all for that plan.

Something about this situation felt like it was just as much her problem as Krister’s.



THE three of them left the shop after sundown. The reason being that Ebel had followed Krister from the rooftops. He’d jumped from roof to roof, keeping track of Krister’s whereabouts by tracking where his silver hair went.

“It will only slow us down if the constables see me up there.”

So they set out after sunset.

They locked up the shop and headed to the front of Rock’s apartment first. And just like on that night, Ebel jumped onto the roof while Rock watched.

“You’re as light on your feet as always.”

“Let’s go,” Ebel called down from the building after leaping up there with such agility it astounded Phoebe. “I’ll go slowly, so you can keep up.”

Then he bounded from rooftop to rooftop with the quiet power and balance of a prowling cat.

Rock and Phoebe chased after his shadow through the alleys.

The alleyways were hard enough to navigate as it was without the added difficulty of following Ebel’s shadow. Ebel sensed they were struggling and kept to a pace they could keep up with. But unlike the rooftops with few obstacles, the intertwining roads were jam-packed with them. Everything from shacks jutting out into the alley to mountains of junk left lying around and randomly placed wooden fences and stakes obstructed their path.

To make matters worse, there was barely any light, with makeshift buildings sprouting up willy-nilly, blocking the few streetlights.

Rock and Phoebe ran into several dead ends along the way, and every time Ebel directed them toward an alternative route, pointlessly increasing the

amount of time they had to spend walking.

“Sheesh. He’s so nimble I’m starting to envy him,” Phoebe grumbled, staring up at the night sky from the narrow alleyway.

Ebel had just so happened to vault over their heads at that moment. His burnt sienna hair softly floated in the air as he easily made the jump. Watching his catlike movements was enough to make anyone stop and stare in awe.

“Can’t you do the same thing, Phoebe?” Rock asked, thinking back on the time he rescued her from Linus Manor.

“I couldn’t keep it up forever.” Phoebe smiled wryly. “His Excellency has superhuman agility.” He paused, then continued in a mystified whisper, “But it’s strange that he’s *this* agile in *this* form.”

Rock thought the same thing. Ebel had inhuman physical prowess, even in human form. It didn’t matter that he had a medium build; he could still overpower Phoebe, who was significantly more built.

Then Rock suddenly remembered the story Phoebe had told her about how the people oppressed during the age of the Ancient Empire had clung to the power of the werewolves.

At that time, Rock thought it was foolish of them to rely on a curse that would forever change their shape, even if they gained the power to fight back in return—but would she think the same if she could exert the strength of a werewolf while in human form?

Perhaps what the Werewolf Brotherhood was really after were powers they could use even in human form.

Rock contemplated those things as she followed Ebel crossing the rooftops.

Her meandering thoughts were eventually interrupted by his voice.

“...This seems to be the place,” he said, looking down from the rooftop.

They were in a cluttered alleyway that was very much a part of the slums. Ebel gestured toward a two-story hovel protruding diagonally out onto the road Rock and Phoebe had taken.

When viewed from the road, the front side was a one-story building, and the

back was a two-story building. A streetlight stood right behind the one-story building, blocking out the light, so the front of the hovel was poorly lit.

“I saw Krister enter this building two weeks ago.” Ebel pointed to the one-story building.

Rock surveyed the building from the ground.

Perhaps he didn’t use it as his workshop, since he didn’t have any signs out. There was only one window, but the shutters were down, and she couldn’t see inside.

The front door was obviously shut, and she couldn’t hear any sounds inside, even when she put her ear against it.

“Not to be rude, but are you sure this is the place?” Phoebe asked politely. Ebel gave a big enough nod they could see it in the bad lighting.

“He lives in a one-story house, and I saw light through the window as soon as he went inside. His neighbor lives in a two-story house that casts a shadow on his rooftop. A streetlight stood directly behind the buildings, so I figured he built his hovel in the middle of what used to be a road.”

Phoebe seemed convinced by Ebel’s detailed account.

“You have a great memory.”

“Thank you, Phoebe.”

Ebel jumped down from the roof, happy for the compliment. He turned toward Rock and Phoebe after he landed with catlike ease.

“All right, it seems the house owner is out. What do you want to do now?” he asked.

“Want to start by knocking on the door?” Rock suggested, knocking on the hovel’s door three times.

They waited a couple of minutes, but there was no reaction, as they expected.

“Guess we’re stuck breaking down the door?” Phoebe rolled up his dress sleeves, revealing his muscular arms.

Rock stopped him despite thinking it was a splendid idea. “Wait. Let’s get a

light source first. I doubt there's any lamps lit if he's away."

The closed shutters were of shoddy craftsmanship and had gaps. The sheer lack of light coming through told them it was pitch-dark inside.

"In that case, let's borrow that."

Ebel looked toward the streetlight.

The imperial capital streetlights set up on the street corners each consisted of an oil-lit lantern secured to a tall post by wire. The lantern could be removed if they undid the wire. It was at a height an ordinary person couldn't reach without a ladder, but Ebel needed no such thing.

"Won't that upset the constables...?"

"I'll return it when we're done. We'll only be borrowing it for a moment."

"Yeah! We just have to return it before they find out."

Rock expressed her concern, but Phoebe immediately agreed with Ebel's plan.

These two might just get along better than I thought. Rock forced a smile as she decided to go along with them.

Ebel easily removed the lantern from the post and hopped down with it. Its warm light surrounded them and illuminated the door. Phoebe's expression hardened just as Rock was filled with relief.

"Look."

He pointed at something that'd fallen on the cobblestones in front of the door with the tip of his boot. At first, Rock thought it was a button, but the light revealed it to be a small bloodstain.

"...Oh no..."

Rock was at a loss for words.

The bloodstains had already dried and become discolored, proving they weren't from today or the day before.

"Break down the door now," Ebel requested.

Phoebe nodded and twisted the doorknob as hard as he could. The hovel's

door was no match for a battle-hardened mercenary, and it came off its hinges with a creak that sounded like a death cry. The three of them rushed inside through the gap.

But, contrary to what they were expecting, the inside was clean.

Nothing, not even a drop of blood, littered the floor. It looked like someone had swept up the place.

The room's furnishings consisted of a simple bed, a workbench with fragments of charcoal on it, a desk, and several cupboards. Despite being locked up for some time, it didn't smell of dust or mold and even seemed to be filled with a familiar, sweet scent.

"No one's here."

Rock gasped after looking around the hovel.

Where did Krister get off to after leaving a trail of blood? Of course, there was no guarantee that was *his* blood, but still...

"I wonder if he was kidnapped or fled in the night..." Phoebe raised an eyebrow.

"Probably the former."

"What makes you say that?" Phoebe asked Rock.

Rock slowly walked up to the workbench. "This."

She picked up a piece of charcoal left there. The tip was cut to make it easier to draw marks like the charcoal pencil Rock had at the shop.

"Is that a charcoal pencil?" Ebel asked, coming over with the lantern.

"Yes, it is. It's a sewing tool used to mark fabrics," Rock answered, then continued with confidence, "No tailor would run without their sewing tools."

She knew as someone of the same trade that tailors couldn't earn the price of bread without their tools. Krister probably couldn't do business without the tools he'd grown accustomed to.

"I see..." Phoebe groaned, his expression darkening.

A kidnapping worsened the situation significantly compared to him fleeing on

his own. Krister's life might be in danger as they spoke.

"But I don't see any other tools." Ebel grimaced as he closely examined the workbench. "Did he purposely not bring it because you can get charcoal anywhere? Or did someone leave it, not knowing it was a sewing tool...?"

As Ebel said, there weren't any other sewing tools around aside from the charcoal. Pincushions, measuring tape, scissors, needle threaders, punch needles, and the like were expected at a tailor's workbench, and Krister also sold fabric and buttons. None of those items could be found anywhere.

"Maybe he put his other tools away. Let's check," Rock suggested, prompting everyone to search the house.

The three of them combed the room, relying on the light from their lantern. But they couldn't find any other tools, scraps of fabric, buttons, or clothes for sale in the market.

All they found was a shriveled apple and moldy old bread in the cupboard and books shoved messily under the desk. Dust had fallen into his water jug, and it was easy to see the stagnant water hadn't been used for a long time.

"I'm surprised that bastard could read."

Phoebe crouched and pulled the pile of books out from under the desk. A thin layer of dust had collected on top of them, but Phoebe dusted them off and checked the contents of each volume.

"There are books on Southern history, climate, culture, and even their old lullabies..."

"I wonder if he collected them for Nisha," Rock said cheerfully.

Phoebe seemed unsure of how to react. He glanced at his daughter's face and smiled.

"Maybe so."

Phoebe flipped through a book and frowned at the sentence recorded on the endpaper.

"This is a rental. It'll cost him a fortune if he doesn't return it soon."

Books were valuable in the imperial capital because every volume was written by hand and took time and effort to create. Commoners couldn't afford them, which was why book rental shops were established around the capital. Rock wasn't the reading type, but she knew Phoebe often visited those shops.

"I wonder if they're all rentals. Should we return them for him?" Rock asked.

"Don't even try. You'll end up paying for them."

Rock and Phoebe checked every book, and it turned out most of them were rentals. Then something else slipped out from between one book's covers onto the ground.

"...What's this?" Ebel picked it up, raised the lantern, and looked at the cover. "'Sales Ledger'... It looks like it's his account book."

It was a simple notebook with its pages tied together with string—clearly different from a normal book.

"This falls in your wheelhouse, Roxy."

Rock excitedly opened the ledger Ebel handed her.

Contrary to his work ethic, Krister seemed to be diligent when it came to bookkeeping. He'd recorded his sales and necessary expenses in detail, and from that, Rock could tell he was making a decent profit as a tailor. Judging by customer numbers alone, he had far more traffic than Floria Clothes Shop, making Rock a little jealous.

But that was trivial now.

The big job in question was mentioned about a month ago, just around when Nisha stopped seeing Krister. He'd received an order for thirty blue robes with wool satin faille fabric and a special request for a unique embroidery, but he didn't detail what kind of embroidery.

And although he didn't write down the customer's name, they were definitely a big spender.

"He received full pay the same day he accepted the order." Rock explained what she'd learned from the ledger to Phoebe and Ebel. "And it was ten times market price. This goes beyond just a generous or lavish spender."

Krister likely overcharged his customers, so he must've been ecstatic they were willing to pay this much.

And if that wasn't juicy enough, he received the same amount of money once every few days in the name of expenses. Rock had no way of telling if Krister or the customer suggested the extra payments, but either way, it meant his customer was wealthy enough to afford it.

"It's not your average slightly rich man we're dealing with here. Must be a wealthy merchant or some nob..." Phoebe paid Ebel a sideways glance.

"I could afford it," Ebel agreed. "But the buyer's methods lack class." He seemed like he'd more to say but stopped to quietly sneeze in the elegant way only noblemen could. Embarrassed, he apologized. "Forgive me. An odd smell has been tickling my nose since entering the room..."

"I know what you mean. There's something snooty about this smell; it's grating on my nerves." Phoebe scrunched up his nose.

A sweet smell hung thick in Krister's apartment. It had a faint but unique scent, like smoked wood. Rock felt as if she'd smelled the same scent years ago.

"What kind of scent is this?" Rock asked the room.

Ebel was first to answer.

"Fragrant wood."

"What's that...?"

"It's an incense made from sweet-smelling trees. And it's an incredibly high-quality one too."

No wonder why it smelled like smoked wood then. Yet, it didn't quite smell smoky and had a slightly sweet scent, which gave it the qualities of an expensive fragrance.

"People who enjoy this smell often burn the incense in their rooms or perfume their clothes with it." Ebel frowned as he continued, "This kind of incense is almost always imported. It's far from cheap."

"It's the kind you have to cough up a mountain of gold coins just to buy one of this size," Phoebe explained, pointing to his pinky finger. He might have had big,

bony fingers, but it still wasn't big enough to adequately convey the scent's expense.

Rock grimaced.

"For his room to have such an expensive smell must mean—"

"It's likely the smell of a customer who came here."

"And I'm willing to bet it's the wealthy customer who dumped a pile of money on him to make robes," Phoebe finished, his thoughts in perfect sync with Ebel's.

Rock gleaned just how rich this customer was from Krister's ledger. Someone who could pay in advance for a huge order of thirty robes, frequently paid for expenses along the way, and had money to spare for the luxury of perfuming their clothes with incense had to be as wealthy as a nobleman.

The problem at hand was if and how this person was related to Krister's disappearance, but the answer still eluded them.

And something else bothered Rock.

"The ledger doesn't state if he delivered the goods."

Flipping through all the old transactions showed Rock Krister made a point of recording when he'd delivered the goods. Only this most recent job lacked any record of being delivered. And if that wasn't weird enough, any kind of record stopped being made two weeks ago.

"He hasn't written a thing since the day he came to my apartment."

The last time anyone recalled seeing him was during the following morning. Something that triggered Krister's disappearance may have happened that day.

"I don't think Krister ran for it," Rock told the other two her thoughts. Sure, a piece of her hoped that was the case, but she drew her conclusions solely from her experience as a tailor. "Neither thirty robes nor the materials to make them are in this building right now. But it's physically impossible to flee carrying all of that. It'd be too much baggage."

Maybe that'd be a slightly different story for someone with superhuman strength like Ebel, but Krister had sticks for arms. It was unlikely he was able to

escape without anyone noticing him hauling off thirty blue robes.

“What’re the chances he delivered the product but didn’t have time to record it?” Phoebe asked, too cautious to jump to conclusions. “He might’ve just been in too big a rush to deal with it.”

“If that was the case, then he shouldn’t have had the time to open his stall during the morning after he dropped by my place.”

Although he wasn’t out long, Krister still did business the next day. That was why all his troublesome customers ended up at Rock’s shop.

“And then we have these rental books.” Aside from all the other evidence she had, the books were the main reason why Rock wanted to believe in Krister. “Would someone who’s planning to make a run for it really borrow books like these?”

She picked up several of the books on the South. History books, culture books, climate books, and even lullabies and fairy tales—he clearly had an interest in the South.

She didn’t know how Krister perceived the way a book rental shop did business. Knowing him, maybe he thought he could borrow as much as he could and never return, so he didn’t have to pay the fees. But even if that’s how he planned to treat the rentals, Nisha still remained the only reason he would pick books on these topics.

“But if he didn’t run for it, then...” Phoebe pushed his chestnut-colored hair up, inhaled, then continued, “...we’re dealing with more than one person. It’d be a skilled group, too.”

“What makes you say that, Phoebe?”

“Look at the floor. There were bloodstains outside, but it’s sparkling clean here.”

In other words, if Krister was hurt by someone, then that someone had enough time to kidnap an adult male, carry away thirty robes and sewing tools, and even scrub the possibly bloodstained floors.

“If that’s true, then they’re frighteningly skilled.”

Rock shuddered as she imagined what might've happened here. Ebel gently rested his hand on her shoulder.

"Whether he delivered the goods or not, we need to identify the customer. As far as we know, that's the last person Krister met."

Rock and Phoebe both nodded.

"Good point. If only we could find them..."

"There aren't many clues. If only we knew the embroidery design..."

Father and daughter exchanged looks, furrowing their brows at the same time. Then, suddenly, Ebel's glowing golden eyes darted toward the gaping door.

"...Someone's coming."

The werewolf count's ears picked up on a sound Rock's could not. Phoebe seemed not to hear it either, but he acted fast. He blew out the lantern fire and stealthily looked outside through the door.

"I can't see anyone yet, but...I think our time is up. How do you want to do this?"

"Let's escape to the roof. Whoever they may be, we don't want to get caught here," Ebel said, pushing open the broken door without making a sound. Then he turned to Rock, who followed behind him and whispered, "Don't make a sound."

Thanks to that warning, Rock barely swallowed her cry when his arm wrapped around her waist and yanked her to him. Ebel easily ascended Krister's roof with Rock in one arm. Then he reached down with his free hand and pulled Phoebe up. The three of them crouched on the dark rooftop and waited with bated breath.

Footsteps and lantern light approached. Rock squinted in the direction of the alleyway where the streetlight was out and the stars didn't shine.

Before long, a city constable wearing a surcoat over his armor appeared from around the corner.

He was likely on patrol. He walked in their direction, shining his lantern's light

over the surrounding area. Then he stopped in front of Krister's hovel and glanced at the broken door.

Will he find us? Rock held her breath, but the constable only gave the door a fleeting glance. He quickly departed without being alarmed by the broken door or paying heed to the bloodstains at the entrance.

Everyone on the rooftop finally breathed as soon as the constable was entirely out of sight.

"We scraped by on that one."

"Great work he's doing, not even checking what happened."

Ebel and Phoebe seemed relieved, but Rock had mixed emotions.

"...It's kinda sad when you think about it," she muttered, getting an odd look from the other two. "We're the only ones who know this is Krister's house. It's just sad to think it will be left forever unchecked even though he's disappeared..."

Both Ebel and Phoebe's expressions darkened.

If Krister never came back, the hovel would be left as a vacant house. Getting occupied by a vagrant would be one of the better outcomes, although it was more likely one of the flippant slum dwellers would demolish it and use the materials to build a different shack.

"Is it a bad idea to tell Nisha about it?" Rock asked.

Phoebe was first to shoot down that idea. "She'll only worry more if she sees the blood."

"You think so too...?"

"If you're going to bring her any news, it'd better be good." Phoebe patted Rock on the head to comfort her. He looked down at her with an affectionate smile. "Since we've come this far, why don't we track him down?"

"I agree," Ebel said, his expression grim. "Something about this customer of his bothers me. I'll use my connections to look into what someone could possibly want that many robes for."

“Please do, Ebel.”

Someone capable of putting out that much money couldn't possibly reside in the slums. Ebel was the best person to look into that side of things.

They descended from the roof and decided to leave the area for now. On their way out, Rock grabbed Krister's ledger from his apartment. She thought it might still have some clue to his whereabouts.

“I feel sort of guilty looking at someone else's ledger, though.”

“Kinda late for that, isn't it?” Phoebe laughed, then glared at the door he'd broken down. “We should probably seal this place up.” He turned to Rock and Ebel next. “Go on home first. I'll take care of things here.”

“Will you be all right alone, Phoebe?”

Phoebe even laughed at Rock's concern. “Who do you think you're talking to? Besides, we have to return this guy,” he said, holding up the extinguished lantern. The streetlight still stood as just a post without any light behind the hovel.

“You don't mind if we leave it to you?” Ebel asked.

“Not at all,” Phoebe snorted. “Make sure you *safely* escort my daughter back home too, Your Excellency.”

“You needn't worry about that. Her safety is guaranteed with me.”

No sooner did Rock see Ebel stand up tall and confident than he pulled her close again. He launched himself off the ground with her in his arms faster than she could react. They landed softly on top of the roof.

“Ready to head back, Rock?”

“What? B-By rooftop?!” Rock cried out despite herself.

Ebel didn't seem to mind as he answered mid-run. “It's safer than by ground.”

“That may be true, but— UWAAAAAAAAAAH!” Rock's protests melted into screams that were swallowed by the night wind.

Ebel bounded under the night sky with frightening agility with her tucked under one arm.

A single cold drop hit Rock's cheek as she listened to the roaring night breeze while being carried. Startled, she lifted her head and saw gray clouds hanging in the sky. Meanwhile, drop after drop of rain pelted her face.

"Ebel, it seems to be raining!"

He noticed it without her telling him. He slowed down and looked up at the sky.

"There's still some distance to your place, but...I wonder if it will get much stronger than this."

They temporarily dropped down from the roof and took shelter in the shadow of a nearby building.

Rain was rare in the imperial capital. There was little rainfall throughout the year, and ladies exclusively used umbrellas as parasols.

The rain poured down on the slums, making quiet noise after its long absence.

"I hope Phoebe's all right..." Rock's thoughts went straight to her father and then to the hovel. "The bloodstains will be washed away, won't they?"

Ebel cast down his eyes, understanding what that meant.

"In the end, we might've been the only ones to have discovered it."

"That's likely... We have to do whatever we can to find Krister."

I want to find him for Nisha's sake, not his own.

Rock was completely on Nisha's side. The reason for that didn't need explaining.

She stole a glance at the man standing beside her. Ebel was looking up at the sky from under the eaves, trying to get a feel for when the rain would let up. Raindrops glistened on his burnt sienna hair, some of the locks sticking to his handsome face. His melancholy expression brightened when he noticed Rock's gaze.

"Doesn't look like it'll let up any time soon. Care to put your trust in me?"

"What do you mean?"

"I shall carry you to your rooms without letting a drop touch you."

No sooner did he finish speaking than he scooped Rock up without warning again. This time he held her sideways in front of his chest with both arms. When he looked down at her, Rock was flustered by how he was carrying her and how close his face was.

“U-Um, you needn’t go this far for me!”

“Your father instructed me to safely escort you home.”

“But this is *embarrassing*...”

“You mustn’t move. Please hold on to my neck.”

At his request, Rock timidly wrapped both arms around his neck.

“Perfect.”

He flashed her a blinding smile.

Then he rushed out from under the eaves and leaped onto the rain-soaked rooftop. Leaning forward, he sheltered Rock from the rain as he ran.

As the one being protected, Rock was tormented by feelings of guilt and embarrassment. Even so, she never took her eyes off of Ebel’s determined face as he raced through the downpour.



EBEL was soaked to the bone by the time they’d arrived at Rock’s apartment. And yet he succeeded in protecting Rock up to her doorstep, where he gently lowered her to the ground.

“See? I brought you home without getting you wet.”

He winked triumphantly as water dripped from his burnt sienna hair. Rock pulled out her handkerchief and wiped away the droplets on her tippy-toes.

“You’re soaked, though... You’ll catch a cold like this.”

“This is nothing.” Ebel roughly raked back his dripping locks. “I’m content as long as you are safe. Now then, I shall excuse myself for the evening.”

He smiled once to placate her, then turned to leave.

“Please wait!” Rock hastily called him to a halt. “Let me grab something to dry

you with!”

Ebel turned back around with a wry smile. “I’m thrilled by your concern, but I’ll have to go right back out into the rain. I doubt drying off first will make things much better for me.”

The rain was still pelting the makeshift roofs of the slums. Clouds still blanketed the night sky and seemed unlikely to clear any time soon.

“But...”

Rock gazed up at Ebel standing in front of her.

Not only did his hair change color from having absorbed water, but so did his clothes. Droplet after droplet dripped down in streaks on his face as he stared back into Rock’s eyes.

Meanwhile, only Rock’s sleeves were a little wet thanks to him covering her. Krister’s ledger was dry as well.

She knew Ebel only did it because he wanted to, but she just couldn’t forgive herself if she sent him home without thanking him.

So she worked up the courage to say, “In that case, I’ll brew you a pot of hot tea.” Despite realizing how desperate she was coming across, she quickly added, “Why don’t you warm up before you leave? I’ll prepare it real fast.”

Ebel seemed torn on how to answer her. His golden eyes drifted away for a moment before returning to her with a troubled smile.

“I don’t know how to put this, Roxy...”

“What is it?”

“You may be dressed as a man, but you don’t seem to understand a man’s heart.”

Rock blinked. She didn’t expect him to say that of all things.

“I don’t?”

“You don’t.”

“I wonder about that... I guess the only heart I can say I know for sure is my own.”

Rock enjoyed dressing and living as a man but wasn't confident she was pulling it off right. On the other hand, she did succeed at acting the part of a weak and fragile man.

"I would've happily accepted your offer the other day, but your father entrusted your safety with me tonight. If I come inside, this escort will stop being *safe*."

He didn't come right out and say it, but Rock knew what he was getting at. She still persisted despite the heat rising to her cheeks.

"Oh, come on, it's just tea." After Rock said that, she suddenly realized how much that sounded like a different kind of invitation and panicked. "I-It's not like I'm trying to keep you here— ah, I guess I *am* keeping you, but...um...I really don't mean anything weird by this. I j-just want to do something for you..."

The more excuses she made, the more she mumbled and tripped over her words.

Ebel watched her with a faint smile. He chuckled softly after a moment and then said, "I can't very well turn you down when you put it like that. Would you like me to come in for a bit?"

"Just for a bit...?"

"Yes, a very short bit. I only want you to let me into your room while we are still talking."

Rock unlocked the door and invited Ebel inside. The water droplets falling off him quickly formed a puddle on the floor, and he apologetically looked at his feet.

"Sorry, I got your floor dirty."

"Don't worry. I can just wipe it up later," Rock laughed it off.

"Your clothes will probably get wet. Please change after I leave."

"Wha...?"

Ebel caught Rock in his arms faster than she could ask him what he meant. Embraced by his drenched chest, Rock's clothes began to absorb some of the rainwater. The water gradually sank in and spread like an infection. Even so, she

felt Ebel's warmth through her cold clothes, leaving her more comfortable than not.

"I kind of feel like I pushed you into this," Rock bashfully whispered into his chest. Ebel rubbed gentle, soothing circles into her back.

"You can ask this of me anytime."



“Thank you.”

Rock closed her eyes, wrapped up in pure bliss. At the same time, the anxiety she never realized she had nestling in her chest disappeared. Apparently, sympathizing with Nisha had bred unnecessary unease within her.

“I kept thinking about what I’d do...if you disappeared,” she confessed in a breathless whisper. “I never want that to happen, so please don’t go anywhere.”

“I would never go anywhere without you,” Ebel declared without hesitation. “Besides, all hell would break loose if I vanished, even if I didn’t want it to.”

Unlike the people of the slums, Ebel was a bona fide citizen of the imperial capital and a count at that. Someone would notice if he suddenly went missing, and a search would be conducted right away, especially when he had servants like Johanna and Ludovicus who’d immediately report his absence.

“I’m more worried about you.”

“I’ll be fine. I have Phoebe.”

“You do, but...we still don’t know a thing about Krister’s case,” Ebel said, rubbing his cheek against Rock’s. “Please don’t disappear on me, Roxy.”

He hugged her tightly, as if she were his most precious and irreplaceable treasure.

Rock relished every moment of their embrace.

She mustn’t keep him too long, which was why she silently enjoyed the time they had.

Through their wet clothes, she felt every aspect of the body she’d measured that day. And she also caught a whiff of his smell. It was the faint, pleasant scent of soap on human skin rather than the doglike smell of his werewolf form.

Now that she thought about it, Phoebe had scrunched up his nose and asked her if she’d brought home a stray the day after Ebel had first visited her shop. It was kind of strange to think the werewolf curse even changed a person’s scent, but it was a little late to be surprised by that when it already changed their physique and mass.

As Rock was becoming better acquainted with his human scent, she suddenly remembered the sweet fragrance hanging thick in Krister's apartment. She couldn't shake the feeling she was intimately familiar with the fragrant wood smell.

She'd smelled that same scent while being embraced, just as she was right now.

"My mother smelled like that fragrant wood incense once," Rock said as the memory came to her.

The smell had come from her mother's apron pocket when they'd hugged. That was the same day a thief had broken into her mother's shop and stolen all her proceeds. No one could find the thief in the sparsely populated mountain village, and that's when Rock's mother comforted her with these words:

"Don't worry about the money. We'll manage."

"Mother had the incense on her..." Rock furrowed her brow as the memory grew clearer.

"If I'm not mistaken, your mother was also a tailor, right? Did she like incense?"

"No. She just had it on her. I never saw her burn it."

Expensive incense wasn't the kind of thing a poor mountain tailor would freely carry on them. But *why* she had it made more sense after Rock learned about her mother's family history.

How did Vale Floria feel when she traded her treasured incense for money?

"My father says Mother was the daughter of a low-ranking imperial nobleman," Rock confided in Ebel, lifting her head to look into his eyes. He was naturally taken by surprise and gasped.

"Really?"

"Yes... Although it seems like she fled home and had nothing to do with her family after that."

But when she thought back on it now, there were various things throughout her childhood that attested to her mother's noble upbringing.

“What was your mother’s maiden name?”

“Valencia Alexis...or so Father says.”

Ebel’s expression changed as soon as she shared that information. He released her from his embrace and placed his hands on her shoulders. Then he peered down at her face and grimly asked, “Who else knows this?”

“I’m the only one Father told,” Rock replied, feeling overwhelmed. “And you’re the only one I’ve told, Ebel.”

“...Then I suggest you don’t tell another soul,” Ebel instructed her in an unusually hard voice.

“I haven’t had any direct contact with the Alexis family, but I’ve heard the rumors. It seems the youngest sister left the family, and the parents died one after another right after. The remaining sister lost the will to protect the family name and was forced to take a husband to who she entrusted headship. But then they were unable to have any children and are currently looking into adopting an heir, but are hesitant to pass on the title to someone who isn’t at least distantly related.”

Rock struggled to wrap her head around the flood of information he presented her.

Seeing her expression, Ebel kindly simplified the issue. “All that is to say they might seek you out as an heir if news of your relationship gets out.”

“They’d want *me*?!”

Rock was stunned.

An even more unbelievable reality had just been added to the already surreal story of her mother’s family.

But there’s no way some fancy nobles would want a tailor from the slums as their heir...

“But Father said Mother no longer has any connection to her family...”

“That probably has more to do with what your parents wanted.”

Ebel was the picture of calm after he got over his initial shock. He staidly

advised Rock.

“We don’t know if the Alexis family feels the same. Keep your connection a secret if you don’t want to get roped into anything.”

Rock never planned on sharing this secret from the start. Phoebe likely divulged the information to his daughter with that intention too, and Rock had only told Ebel because she trusted him fully.

While she was curious about her mother’s past, she didn’t want anything to do with it. There was no reason for her to deliberately go after what her mother had tossed aside.

“I won’t tell anyone else,” Rock vowed as she stared into his golden eyes. Ebel’s features finally softened and he nodded.

“That’s for the best. I’ll keep your secret too.”

“I trust you.”

“I’m honored, Roxy.”

His eyes lingered on her face, studying her in earnest as his still wet hair stuck to his cheeks.

“...I must admit, you remain a mystery to me,” he whispered in a velvety voice. “You dress as a man, yet you aren’t one. I met you in the slums, but you have noble blood running through you. It’s been quite a while since we first met, and it seems I’ll need much more time to learn about you.”

“I don’t have any other secrets...probably,” Rock said bashfully.

“Probably, eh?” Ebel grinned. “I’d love the opportunity to uncover everything there is to know about you.”

“Everything?” Rock repeated, catching on to the double meaning just as his lips pressed against hers.

“I won’t take a thing from you,” he vowed after their fleeting kiss. “I’ve decided to only receive what you give.”

“What are you talking about, Ebel...?”

“I want to share our future together.” Ebel didn’t give Rock a second to

process his sudden proposal. “I’d love to introduce you to my father in the near future. Well, I’d like to bring you to his grave, to be precise...” He intertwined his fingers with hers and whispered almost pleadingly into her ear. “Won’t you consider it, Roxy?”



ROCK stripped out of her wet clothes after Ebel left. She felt like his warmth was leaving her too as she slipped her arms through clean sleeves. But staying wet would only lead to a cold, so she changed despite the loneliness it brought.

His proposal lingered in her thoughts.

“Share our future together, huh...?”

Rock was delighted he felt that way about her, and she wanted the same thing. But she felt insecure. Not because of Ebel, but because of the things she didn’t know about her mother’s family.

I want to decide my future for myself. And I have to keep my lineage a secret to do that.

Rock firmly made up her mind to keep her secret that way for good.

Chapter 3: The Hunter and the Hunted

THE rain stopped overnight in the imperial capital. But it lasted long enough to wash off the missing person posters posted around the slums.

The same held true of the poster Rock had put out in front of her shop. She saw it on the ground when she came to work the next morning and rehung it after laying it out in the sun to dry. The drawing of Krister's face had become too blurred to make out, and the letters were just barely legible.

Missing: Krister Gionet

28-year-old male

Slender, silver hair, charcoal-black eyes

His whereabouts remained a mystery.

Meanwhile, Rock's life had changed slightly. She moved into Phoebe's apartment the day after they'd visited Krister's hovel.

"I just think things are getting dangerous."

Phoebe seemed even more worried about his daughter after searching Krister's house. As it was, they'd already discussed moving in together. They just didn't have the time to look for a new place after the chaos caused by the whole Krister ordeal.

Rock wholeheartedly approved of living with her father after the mysterious disappearance of a fellow tailor happening right after he'd accepted a suspicious order from an unknown customer.

They were currently in the process of moving a few of her things into his place at a time. It was impossible to bring all her stuff when Phoebe lived in a one-bedroom apartment. So their official move was postponed to a later date when things settled down enough to look for a bigger place. Rock would be stuck paying Lady Trilian rent until then, but desperate situations called for desperate

measures.

Both father and daughter decided to put their personal safety above everything else for the time being.

Setting aside the circumstances that led to the move, living together was actually a lot of fun and peaceful.

It went without saying Phoebe was an excellent cook. He'd always bring Rock food whenever she got overly busy with work, but now that they were living together, she was treated to his cooking every day. There was no greater bliss than no longer having to go to bed hungry after a tiring day at work.

"Couldn't you have become a master chef, Father?" Rock asked, patting her full belly after dinner.

A scowl spread across Phoebe's makeup-less face.

"Yuck! I don't want to cook for some stranger."

"Really? Why not?"

"I only enjoy cooking when it's for myself and family," Phoebe replied sheepishly.

Rock thought it was a waste of his talent but also understood the sentiment.

"Did you often cook for Mother too?"

"Yeah, you could say that. Whoever was free at the moment cooked when we were living together."

Phoebe always became a little embarrassed and shy when talking about the past.

The time Rock's father spent with her mother was undeniably a happy memory for him, regardless of how their relationship started and ended. Rock loved knowing that and seeing her father's bashful side.

"Which one of you was the better cook?" she asked next.

Naturally, she'd eaten home cooking from both her parents. She knew the answer but wanted to know what her father would say.

Phoebe glared at her to hide his awkwardness, just as she expected.

“Not telling.”

“Wow, that’s not fair! I can’t believe you won’t tell your own daughter!”

“It’s no use trying to make fun of your parents, Roxy.”

His big hand ruffled her wine-colored hair. She giggled from the ticklishness, drawing a lopsided grin out of Phoebe.

“C’mon, get to reading that letter already.”

He jerked his chin toward a single envelope sitting on top of the dining table.

The letter had been delivered to Floria Clothes Shop during the afternoon, and the sender was Ebel. It remained unopened with the red wax seal intact. She’d had too many customers during the afternoon to read it.

Urged on by her father, Rock picked up the letter and sat with it on the sofa. Phoebe peered over the backrest just as she pulled the stationery out of the envelope.

“Did he finish it off with, ‘Love always’?”

“*Gah!* Father! Don’t look!” Rock cried.

Phoebe howled with laughter after getting a rise out of his daughter.

“I won’t. I’ll be in my room. Call if you need anything,” he said, his nightgown fluttering as he turned to go to his bedroom.

Was he trying to get back at me for teasing him about Mother earlier? Laughing dryly, Rock returned her attention to the letter.

Ebel’s elegant handwriting filled the page.

He wrote her to discuss two things. The first asked her about what day and time would be best for her to visit his father’s grave.

The second was about Krister Gionet. He wrote:

“I came across some disturbing information while looking into Krister. I want to discuss it with you in person, so please visit my residence with Phoebe.”

“It seems like he found out something about Krister,” Rock called out to Phoebe, who’d retreated into the other room. Her father sat beside her on the

sofa once she'd folded up the letter and put it back in the envelope.

"What did he find out?"

"He didn't say. Maybe it's something he couldn't tell us by letter."

He didn't even hint at whether it was good or bad news. But after all they'd gone through to find out more, Rock wanted to know the truth, whatever it may be.

"I tried looking into it too, but got nothing."

Rock had scrutinized every corner of Krister's sales ledger. However, not only was there nothing to bring the customer's identity to light, but it also didn't give away any reason Krister might've disappeared.

There was only one thing that stood out as suspicious.

She found traces of a mistake being blotted out on the entry referring to the order of thirty robes. Several letters had been painted over just before it said "Blue Cloth Robes."

If the passage was written with a pen, it could've just been an ink stain, but Krister used the charcoal pencil to write in his ledger too.

He'd probably written something by mistake right before "Blue Cloth Robes."

"If only I knew what he'd written..." Rock groaned.

Unfortunately, there was no way to read the painted-over letters.

Rock had no choice but to put her hope in the information Ebel had obtained now that her own search had hit a wall.

"But boy, we sure seem to have a lot of business in the aristocrat district lately," Phoebe said with a dry laugh. "I never thought I'd roam those parts for anything other than business."

It certainly seemed strange that Phoebe had fallen in love with an aristocrat's daughter when he put it that way. Rock had heard the story of how her mercenary father and low-ranking noble mother had met and struggled to be together.

"I told His Excellency about Mother's family," Rock confessed.

Phoebe seemed to expect her to. His expression softened as he asked, “He knew of the Alexises, right?”

“Yeah. Are they famous?”

“More like infamous...” Phoebe trailed off before continuing with a sigh, “That family is no stranger to scandal.”

That didn’t sound good.

Rock pulled her knees up onto the sofa and wrapped her arms around them.

“...They have a lot of enemies then?”

“Yeah. Just as many inside as out.”

Phoebe folded his hands under his chin, his expression hardening.

“I first met Vale on a bodyguard job. The Alexises were traders—they had money. So much money, everyone wanted a piece of them. Business rivals often hired bandits to steal their cargo. And one time, I traced back some blackmail and death threats to a relative. Working for them left a bad aftertaste.”

Wealthy traders—that fact explained why her mother had a stick of fragrant wood incense on her. It saddened Rock to think how different her mother’s past was from her humble last few years of life.

“That’s why they hired mercenaries as bodyguards. The pay was good at least.” Phoebe was trying to be matter-of-fact about it. But his bashfulness showed through every time he raked his hair back with his fingers. “I ended up never getting hired again, though. Some bodyguard I was—I made their daughter run away from home.”

“Not much you could do about that,” Rock said with a big grin.

Phoebe sulkily looked at his daughter’s devious expression before closing his eyes.

“But I also think Vale had a hard time being in that house. She was always competing with her older sister to see who’d inherit everything.”

Did the memories come flooding back during his brief pause? His next words

sounded so sad.

“Their family had so many enemies, their heir had to be the best of the best. I can kind of understand why their parents felt that way, but it resulted in their competing daughters constantly being at each other’s throats. Vale hated going against her sister and felt so cornered, she decided to choose a totally different path in life. Every once in a while, I heard her quietly comment how she wished they could go back to when they used to get along as children... I just couldn’t leave her like that.”

Rock was stunned by the gritty details of her mother’s past.

Ebel had also told her about how her aunt was forced to take on a husband after her mother left and their parents died and was now looking to adopt an heir.

“His Excellency also mentioned Mother’s older sister,” Rock hesitantly told him. Her mother’s older sister would be her biological aunt. It just didn’t feel real when she always thought she had no relatives. “He said I should keep my identity a secret because they’re feuding over who should be the heir.”

“He’s right. You shouldn’t get involved,” Phoebe stressed, completely agreeing with Ebel’s advice. He combed his fingers through Rock’s hair as he spoke in a soothing voice, “To tell you the truth, they kept sending spies to the village where you and Vale lived.”

“What spies?”

“They were hired by the Alexises. They were secretly snooping around you girls.”

“No way!”

Rock was alarmed, but Phoebe calmly continued.

“I occasionally spotted them when I visited. I choked a few of ’em until they confessed what they were doing there. They were planning on dragging Vale back home the second they got the chance. There were a couple of rough ones, so I courteously sent them on their way.”

This was all news to Rock. She never imagined her father was taking

precautions to protect her poor yet peaceful childhood.

“You really protected Mother, didn’t you, Father?”

“I protected you too, Roxy.”

“You’re amazing. Thank you.”

Phoebe started to break into a smile but quickly flattened his lips.

“I did my best, but I don’t think for a moment that I was able to stop everything from getting back to them. I’m willing to bet they at least figured out Vale had a daughter.”

It was like a lantern lit in Roxy’s mind when he said that.

“Wait...is *that* why you had me start dressing as a man?”

Her late realization seemed to be on the money. Phoebe nodded with a smile.

“That was definitely a part of it.”

“I never knew...”

“Well, I planned on keeping the fact I was your father a secret too. I racked my brains trying to find a way to tell you.”

But Phoebe’s worries were put to rest when Roxy Floria happily donned the guise of a man—something she’d always wanted to do.

And after three years, Ebel was the only person to see through her disguise. Her delicate features probably perfectly fit the bill of a young man who didn’t eat great in the slums.

Thanks to that, she was able to live a relatively peaceful life as a tailor in the slums.

I hope things remain peaceful, Rock thought. *That way, I can pay back Father for protecting me all this time.*

“It’s all thanks to you that I’ve stayed safe until now.”

Phoebe silently pulled Rock’s head to him. He pressed his forehead against hers and peered into her eyes.

“Don’t worry,” he said to reassure her. “I’ll protect you until the day you leave

to get married.”

His blue eyes were so scarily serious, Rock nearly laughed.

“I don’t plan on leaving anytime soon.”

“You mean it?”

“I really mean it.”

Ebel had asked her to “share a future together.”

Rock wanted that too. But that didn’t have to start right this second. She wanted to be a good daughter to her father before becoming a wife. They’d finally started living together, after all.

“Remember this always, Roxy,” Phoebe looked straight into his daughter’s eyes. “Your future is yours alone. You decide how you want to live.”

“I will.”

“But you can rely on me whenever you are lost. It’s a parent’s job to lend their child a hand when they need it.”

“Thank you, Father.”

Rock hadn’t lost her way yet. But no one knows what the future holds.

Just as she never could have imagined she would someday fall in love with someone, Rock was beginning to realize life always has unexpected bumps and turns in store.

Even so, she wasn’t alone. She had people who would extend their hands and help her back on her feet if she fell. So she strangely wasn’t scared.

Several days later, Rock and Phoebe took the day off work and departed the slums. They boarded the carriage that came for them and headed for the aristocrat district, where Ebel waited.



MATEUS Manor beautifully towered over the gardens without a single scratch from that night a month and a half ago.

Rock and Phoebe exited the carriage and stared up at the limestone mansion

that glistened white as snow in the sunlight.

“It’s almost as if that night never happened,” Rock murmured sentimentally.

“But it wasn’t a lie or a dream,” Phoebe stressed, quietly shaking his head. “And it’s not over yet.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Rock and Phoebe weren’t even the ones who most wished that night had just been a bad dream.

They hadn’t seen Guido or Michaela since. Rock only knew how they were doing from the occasional updates she received from Ebel. On the bright side, Ebel never sounded grim when he talked about them, and the siblings seemed to be getting along fine supporting each other.

They would surely meet again someday.

Rock couldn’t stop herself from hoping they would be at peace with their situation by then.

As father and daughter were going down memory lane in front of the beautiful manor—

“MAAASTER ROCK!”

The wrought iron doors were flung open and Johanna, the maid, greeted them in a loud voice. Ludovicus, the butler, and Ebel were right behind her, but she was first to run toward Rock and throw her arms around her in a leaping hug.

“W-Whoa!”

Rock staggered under her weight, and Phoebe hastily supported her from behind. Oblivious to the fact she nearly knocked Rock over, tears filled Johanna’s eyes.

“I’m so glad to see you’re well!”



“Y-Yeah, thank you.” Though a wry smile formed on her lips, Rock was happy the other girl had worried about her. “I’m glad you’re doing well too. It looks like your injuries have all healed up.”

There weren’t any scars on her adorable round face or on the parts of her hands and feet that showed from under her maid uniform.

“They have! Thanks to you!” she exclaimed with a smile brighter than her brilliant blond hair. “I’m working hard every day for His Excellency!”

“Johanna.” Ludovicus cleared his throat in warning. “It is not proper etiquette to speak to His Excellency’s guests before he can.”

“Uh-oh! I forgot. Pardon me!” Johanna slowly backed away, like she’d only realized her mistake after it was pointed out.

Phoebe stepped back from Rock, letting her straighten to greet Ebel as he approached her.

Ebel was dressed in a gray frock coat with a turned-down collar and midnight black velvet trousers. It wasn’t as awe-inspiring as his formal wear, but it still had a subtle glamor to it.

Ebel stared at Rock and Phoebe with great interest, just as she was captivated by his more casual attire.

“It almost seems like you switched roles today.”

Father and daughter exchanged looks and Rock broke out in a big smile.

“That’s because you invited me as Roxy today,” Rock replied, wearing a dress for the first time since the party.

That said, today, she wore an all-black dress without any embellishments, unlike the gorgeous gown meant for Michaela’s birthday. The plain-weave cotton dress was tailored into an old-fashioned design with a high neckline, sleeves long enough to cover the back of her hands, and a hem that hid her ankles.

Of course, it wasn’t in style—this old black dress had originally been Phoebe’s. It was her last resort after painfully deliberating what to wear to Ebel’s manor.

After all, the only dress Rock had in her possession was that dawn-colored ball gown she'd tailor-made per Guido's request. She had several ready-made pieces in her shop, but they were all tailored in line with the trendiest cuts and embroideries, making them fine for an evening out but unsuitable for visiting a grave.

Rock had resewn and added a belt to the borrowed dress to make it fit her slender figure. Thanks to those additions, the high-waist skirt draped beautifully around her, saving it from looking too plain.

Meanwhile, Phoebe really had switched places with her as he wore male attire for this outing. Dressed in a pair of quilt trousers he had on hand, and the jacket Rock had quickly tailored for the occasion, Phoebe kept the look natural by leaving off his favorite makeup. He looked so gallant with his long, chestnut hair tied back, it was hard to imagine this person looked drop-dead gorgeous in a dress too.

Ebel had said he welcomed Phoebe to come dressed any way he wanted, and Rock also said as much, but Phoebe left his dresses at home. Perhaps he wanted to visit Mateus Manor looking the part of Rock's father. Rock wanted to respect her father's wishes. How he wanted to dress or identify at any given time was his choice.

Everyone should be able to wear the clothes they want. Rock strongly felt that way as a tailor.

Of course, it went without saying neither of them was used to being dressed this way.

"It makes me uncomfortable when you make such a big deal out of it," Phoebe muttered as he rubbed his neck.

"We rarely dress like this, after all," Rock wholeheartedly agreed.

"That's a shame. You both look impeccable. Your usual attire is lovely too, but you shine brilliantly dressed like this as well."

Johanna nodded so hard in agreement with Ebel, her pigtails almost came loose. She seemed like she wanted to say something but kept her lips pressed shut under the butler's watchful eye.

With the basic greetings out of the way, Ebel cut straight to the point.

“I would like you to visit my father’s grave with me first.”

He gestured toward the carriage waiting in the garden. Iniel, the coachman, waited with two horses in front of the carriage Rock had just taken to the manor.

“Our destination is the holy church district, where the Mateus mausoleum is located,” Ebel said before glancing at Johanna. “I would love to treat you to a meal afterward. My maid went to great lengths to make the arrangements.”

Johanna repeatedly nodded again. From the way she nodded so hard, Rock feared her head might pop off. It seemed Ebel wasn’t exaggerating the lengths she went to.

Rock had no objections to that plan. She wanted more time to chat with Ebel, and the tea cakes Johanna had treated her to before tasted heavenly.

Most of all, she was terribly concerned about the new information Ebel had mentioned in his letter.

“It’s just the two of you going to the grave, right?” Phoebe asked Rock. “I’ll wait for you here.”

“You aren’t coming, Phoebe?” Rock inquired, getting the most inscrutable grimace in return.

“The late Count Mateus probably wouldn’t be too happy to see me. He’d be like, ‘What’s some mercenary doing here?’” He shrugged and added, “Besides, I hate gravesites.”

Very few people actually enjoy graveyards, but Rock wasn’t going to force Phoebe to join them if he didn’t want to.

“Okay. In that case—”

“I’ll brew a cup of tea for you then, Master Phoebe!” Johanna slipped in between them and wrapped her hands around Phoebe’s arm as if this was her moment to shine. “How about I continue your tour of the manor?!”

“...Any chance I can spend this time alone?” Phoebe groaned, annoyed.

“Johanna, let our guest enjoy his time as he pleases,” Ebel said with a laugh.

“Aw...if you say so, Your Excellency.”

“You’re in charge, Ludovicus. We’ll be back before sunset.”

“Safe travels, Your Excellency.”

Ebel boarded the carriage accompanied by Rock.

The carriage departed Mateus Manor and quietly proceeded down the gorgeous landscape of the aristocrat district.

Rock and Ebel sat side by side on the velvet seat. It was nowhere near as small and narrow as a fiacre, but there seemed to be little space between them. Perhaps the glass windows on either side of them inside the state-of-the-art carriage made it seem more confining.

To make things even more awkward, every time Rock glanced sideways, she received a passionate look from Ebel in return.

Unsure of what to do with herself, Rock frantically searched for a topic and brought up the first thing that came to mind.

“I-I’m really glad everyone seems to have recovered.”

Today was the first time Rock had seen the Mateus servants since that chaotic night. She was impressed they’d all returned to their jobs without letting their injuries bog them down.

“Thank you for worrying about them.” Ebel happily spoke on this topic. “Everyone getting off with light injuries was a real miracle. I couldn’t protect anyone—and we all struggled to protect ourselves that night...” His expression crumpled for a fleeting moment before he continued to keep the mood from souring. “But we are all in good health. I couldn’t have asked for more.”

“Yes, I completely agree,” Rock said from the heart. “Especially Johanna. She’s even younger than me... I was worried the experience had scarred her, even if the physical injuries didn’t.”

Rock couldn’t forget her tears after that crazy night had ended.

Johanna was an emotional girl who always overreacted, but her tears were

genuine and warranted. She'd gone through such a traumatizing experience and must've been relieved enough to cry after they made it through alive.

Rock was inspired and impressed that the young maid returned to her duties as if nothing had happened.

"That's true. It may have been hard on her," Ebel said, a smile edging its way onto his lips, suggesting there was more to it. "I don't think I've told you this yet, Roxy, but Johanna is no ordinary village girl."

"She's not?!"

Rock was surprised to hear that.

Then again, maybe it was stranger for a "normal" girl to work at a werewolf's mansion and be expected to keep her master's secret.

"The Brutus family is an old family dating back to the Ancient Empire." Ebel grinned like a boy about to pull a prank on the girl he liked. "And they used to be a family of werewolf hunters."

"They hunt...werewolves?"

Rock was even more surprised to hear that and gawked at Ebel's face. The werewolf count's golden eyes shimmered with mirth. Who would've thought a werewolf would employ a hunter?

"You didn't expect that, right?" Ebel let out an amused chuckle. "In Ancient Empire times, a group of werewolves lived in this part of the imperial capital. Oppressed for being peasants, they decided to turn on the emperor. Your father might have told you how they were the ones who made those statues."

"Yes, my father did tell me that."

Phoebe had told Rock the story of how the people suffering under the tyrannical rule of the emperor clung to the werewolf curse stored in the werewolf-shaped statues. The statues had slept untouched for hundreds of years in the ancient ruins, only to be brought into the present-day imperial capital by skilled mercenaries.

"The Brutus family is said to have smoked out and hunted members of the Brotherhood."

“Then wouldn’t that make them the enemy of werewolves?” Rock asked anxiously.

She didn’t doubt Johanna’s loyalty to Ebel for a minute. But it was hard to believe werewolf hunters now served and worked alongside a werewolf.

“They used to be, yes. None of them have seen a werewolf in centuries. They have simply passed down the stories to their descendants,” Ebel replied quite casually. “But my father said it would be easier to find an accomplice in someone who knows about werewolves to some extent rather than someone who doesn’t know a thing.”

His golden eyes softened with nostalgia.

“I needed to hire a new maid after I was cursed. They needed to be someone who knew about werewolves or would easily believe me without being scared. Thinking someone from a clan of werewolf hunters would be perfect for the job, my father searched until he found Johanna.”

“I see...”

Unfamiliar scenery started rolling past the windows just as Ebel was happy to see Rock was convinced by his story.

As the name suggests, the holy church district was where all the religious organizations congregated inside the imperial capital.

Cathedrals of various sizes lined the streets, and this was where imperial citizens often came for everything from daily worship to religious festivals. In addition, there was a vast cemetery on the outskirts of the district, housing many mausoleums built by wealthy families.

Obviously, Rock had never visited before. There wasn’t a single place of worship located in the slums, and even if a caring priest came to spread the wonder and majesty of his faith, few cared to listen. Worse yet, many scurried back home after being deprived of all their possessions.

Rock was fully aware she wasn’t a believer.

But, just for today, she wanted to genuinely pray for Ebel’s father to rest in peace.

The carriage came to a halt and Rock stepped out with her hand resting on Ebel's.

A faintly sweet-smelling breeze blew over the cemetery filled with moss-covered mausoleums and an endless sea of tombstones on the outskirts of this district.

While the imperial capital's ordinary citizens were laid to rest under weather-beaten tombstones, people from certain families—rich ones to be exact—were allowed to build mausoleums instead. Not that they were immune to weather; they all looked just as old as the tombstones they overshadowed.

Moss grew on their stone walls, vines crawled up their pillars, and the coat of arms carved into the doors to indicate which family they belonged to had been scraped away by wind and rain.

"It's this way, Roxy."

Ebel escorted Rock to one particular mausoleum.

The Mateus family mausoleum showed its age just like the other ones they'd passed. The stone door was engraved with the same family crest as the carriage, and Ebel unlocked it without a second's hesitation.

"Please come in. Candles have been lit, but watch your step."

This was Rock's first time entering a mausoleum.

There weren't any in the rural village she'd grown up in. Her mother Vale had been laid to rest in the communal grave at the edge of the village, and Rock hadn't been back to see her since moving to the imperial capital.

Feeling guilty for leaving her mother alone all this time, Rock followed Ebel inside the mausoleum.

"Wow, it really *is* bright inside..."

Rock accidentally let that comment slip out because the interior was far better lit than she'd expected.

Lanterns had been mounted in all four corners of the mausoleum that was bigger than her apartment, making every detail visible.

There was only an altar carved with statues of God on the stone wall with no casket in sight. Flowers and lit candles decorated the altar, and the length of the candles and freshness of the flowers indicated they were likely laid out that morning.

“I told the caretaker I would be visiting today,” Ebel told Rock, responding to the surprised look on her face. “I didn’t want to bring you to a mausoleum that hasn’t been opened up in ages.”

Now that he mentioned it, the air inside was unexpectedly clean and fresh. There were no unpleasant odors—on the contrary, it actually had a refreshing scent reminiscent of a forest.

“It’s such a curious place,” Rock marveled, giving her honest opinion.

“Right?” Ebel gave a small laugh. “There’s no casket even though it’s a grave, after all.”

“There’s none at all?”

“Strictly speaking, it’s hidden behind this altar.”

Ebel pointed to the other side of the altar. Of course, that side was blocked by the altar and the stone wall, making it impossible to see anything.

“We aren’t allowed to touch the bones.” Ebel’s golden eyes narrowed on the wall as if he could see what was blocked from view. “This is considered the boundary between the living and the dead.”

“But it’s not a scary place, is it?”

Rock had imagined a more frightening place when she heard it was a mausoleum. But it was actually more comfortable inside here than outside with the sea of tombstones.

“No, it’s not. A mausoleum is a place to think about those who are no longer with us.”

Ebel walked up to the altar and pointed to the newest name engraved at the foot of the stone deity. His finger gingerly traced the letters.

“Cyrille Mateus. That’s my father’s name.” He turned toward Rock, his eyes imploring her. “Roxy, won’t you please pray for my father?”

“Of course. I came here to do just that,” Rock replied, bowing her head, eyes closed, in front of the altar.

Rock wasn't religious, but she didn't mind praying for the dead.

She wasn't acquainted with Ebel's father. She'd only a vague idea of him from what she'd been told. But she was motivated to pray sincerely for his soul to rest in peace because she knew how much Ebel loved him.

Rock was able to reunite with her father while he was still alive. And if that wasn't a great enough blessing, she was now living with him, enjoying fairly peaceful days under his loving protection.

On the other hand, Ebel's father had passed away, leaving a chasm of unhealed hurt between them. They could no longer make up for the regrets they each held.

So Rock prayed for the soul of Cyrille Mateus to rest in peace.

I will take over caring for Ebel now.

So, please be at peace.

“...I wanted to bring you here at least once.” Ebel took a deep breath after praying for much longer than Rock. “I'm aware this isn't a proper place for a date. Thank you for accompanying me anyways.”

“I'm happy to have had the opportunity to meet him.”

“It means a lot to hear you say that.” Relief washed over Ebel's face as he smiled at Rock. “I'm also grateful you met my father. I'm so glad I could introduce you.”

When he put it that way, Rock couldn't help being a little bothered by her quickly assembled dress. If only she had more time, she could've put her heart into making a piece that would show off her skill to his father.

“To be honest, I wish I could've introduced you in person...” Ebel muttered, the pain and loss evident in his tone. Then he shook his head as if he'd decided to look at it another way. “I know what he would've said if he met you. That's enough for me.”

Rock's curiosity was piqued by that comment.

“I wonder what he would’ve said about me.”

As Ebel had said himself the other day, Rock was truly an enigma.

She was a slum-dweller, a village girl, and a cross-dressing tailor. Her father was a cross-dressing former mercenary, and her mother was the daughter of a nobleman who’d fled home.

If they’d had the opportunity to meet and talk, he definitely would’ve been entertained by her personal history alone.

“My father would definitely have liked you,” Ebel asserted with confidence. “And like I said before, ‘You are very much like your father.’”

“...There’s no higher praise than that.”

A bashful, girly smile blossomed on Rock’s face.

From the way he said that, she could sense how much Ebel trusted his father and the depth of his connection with her own father. She definitely felt a bond established with this man she’d never met from visiting his grave.

“Would you like to come with me to visit my mother’s grave someday?” she asked as the idea hit her.

“Of course, I would love to,” Ebel agreed on the spot. “Please take me with you next time.”

“Thank you. She was buried outside the capital, so we’ll have to travel some distance to get there.”

It took about half a day by carriage to reach the farm village where she was born and raised. That was one of the reasons why she hadn’t visited her mother’s grave. But it wasn’t the only reason—Rock didn’t have a single pleasant memory with anyone from that village except her mother.

“Then shall we make it an overnight trip?”

Ebel’s enthusiastic voice cut through the dark memories permeating Rock’s thoughts. Her eyes went round as she registered his suggestion, and he winked suggestively at her.

“Did I say something funny, Roxy?”

“N-No... I-I don’t think so,” Rock hastily denied it, realizing she was overthinking things.



THEY left the mausoleum and returned to the tombstone-lined cemetery.

“By the way, do you remember the other matter I wrote you about?” Ebel asked in a quiet voice as Rock blinked against the sweet-smelling wind.

“...About Krister?” she asked back in a whisper. He nodded.

“I have something to tell you about him. Are you all right if we go for a short stroll?”

“Yes. Where to?”

Their destination mustn’t be far if he was choosing to leave the carriage behind.

“To a church right around the corner,” he answered gently.

Rock fought not to let her internal disgust show. But her attempts ended in vain as Ebel burst out laughing.

“Please don’t look so miserable. I know it’s not your preferred destination, but I have good reason to take you there today.”

“I-I don’t hate it that much!” Flustered by her blunder, Rock quickly tempered her voice to calmly ask, “What reason do we have to go?”

Ebel quietly answered her as he began to walk in the direction of the church. “Did you notice the smell inside and around the mausoleum?”

Rock kept pace beside him as she drew on the still-fresh memory.

“It smelled good. Like a spring forest...”

“Exactly. The caretaker burned incense before we came.”

Rock frowned at him mentioning incense.

“Incense? Don’t tell me—”

“It’s as you’ve guessed. I can’t believe I didn’t realize it the other day...” Ebel groaned, pressing a hand to his forehead. “Burning incense isn’t limited to the

pastimes of the rich and famous. It's also used by priests and caretakers to remove unpleasant smells or for more religious reasons." His expression turned grim. "Isn't it possible that Krister Gionet was visited by a priest who uses incense daily at work?"

If that was true, then it connected with other clues Rock had come across.

The wealthy customer had ordered robes from Krister. Clothes that didn't show the body's shape were out of style and not used for everyday wear. But there were places that wanted clothes tailored specifically not to draw attention to an individual's figure.

"Are there any clergymen who wear blue robes?" Rock asked. Ebel swiftly shook his head.

"None in the imperial capital as far as I know. Everyone who serves God wears purple robes."

A white limestone church with a towering steeple came into view, and a past-middle-aged priest welcomed them at the door.

"Thank you for coming all this way, Count Mateus."

The priest greeting them with a jovial smile wore a robe dyed a stunning shade of indigo-purple. From the gold-thread embroidery work and the regalness of the holy sigil hanging from his neck, it could be inferred that he was a high-ranking priest.

"I just finished visiting my father's grave and would like to rest here for a spell," Ebel explained.

"Our doors are always open," the priest said warmly. "May you rest well in God's holy light."

The sanctuary overflowed with multicolored lights filtering in through the stained-glass, fixed-frame windows depicting various religious figures and spilled onto the pews below.

Only one middle-aged man had his head bowed in prayer inside the gorgeous sanctuary. Perhaps that was why the priest personally showed Ebel and Rock around.

“Your father is surely overjoyed by your piety, Your Excellency,” he courteously praised Ebel once again as they walked together.

How did Rock appear in his eyes as she accompanied them? He restlessly asked about her only after they’d reached the center of the sanctuary and he’d finished lavishing Ebel with praise.

“By the way, who might this lovely young lady be...?”

“Ah.” Ebel looked over at Rock. He lightly smiled at her as she wisely kept her mouth shut. “She’s the daughter of a distant relative on my mother’s side. She is currently staying at my residence while she undergoes etiquette lessons.”

“Oh... I see, I see.” The priest nodded several times as if impressed by something left unsaid.

“She still isn’t used to high society and is a mild-mannered quiet girl, as you can see.”

It took all of Rock’s will not to laugh after being introduced as having a personality that was a far cry from the truth. As it was, her interest lay more with what the priest was wearing than what he thought of her.

Krister’s ledger had several letters crossed out right before it said “blue robes.” What if he’d mistakenly written purple first?

Krister’s customer had been some sort of clergyman. So he’d simply assumed the order would be for purple robes and wrote that down before the fact. However, what the customer wanted was blue robes, so he hastily blotted it out and corrected the details in his ledger.

Somehow that all seemed like a likely story.

The sweet, elegant scent permeating the sanctuary seemed to support her hypothesis.

Rock and Ebel sat side by side on the sanctuary pew.

Although she was sitting down, this was the last place Rock could relax. The light shining through the stained glass shimmered on the floor like inlaid jewels. It was so quiet when they weren’t talking, you could even hear their clothes rubbing against the pew when they moved.

And then there was the sweet, luxurious smell of fragrant wood in the air.

Rock thought it smelled similar to the scent lingering in Krister's hovel that night.

Noticing Rock's restless energy, Ebel started a conversation with the priest to get the ball rolling.

"May I ask you a question, Reverend Father?"

"You may ask me anything, Your Excellency," the elderly priest replied with a respectful bow.

He looked like a high-ranked priest, but even someone of his status paid respect to a count.

Ebel put his question to the priest as Rock processed the surprising hierarchy at play.

"I see you are wearing purple robes. Are there any clergy in the imperial capital that wear blue robes?"

"No," the priest replied without delay. "Blue is a damned color."

"...Damned?" Rock couldn't help repeating that unsettling word.

Her voice unexpectedly traveled through the high-ceiling sanctuary, and the "mild-mannered, quiet girl" hastily covered her mouth with her hands.

"It *is*. There is a reason why our robes are purple," the priest continued without minding the interruption. "Namely, the blue of water and the red of blood, the gift of life from God and the origin of all existence, combine to make purple."

"...That's what I thought," Ebel whispered to Rock. He seemed to know that convention.

In that case, who in the world would order blue robes?

The blue of water, the red of blood, damnation—every word had an edge of danger to it that left Rock terribly unsettled.

"Why do you ask about such a thing, Your Excellency?"

It was the priest's turn to question them.

“My maid said she saw a group of several people clad in blue robes wandering through the capital,” Ebel answered smoothly as Rock felt her hands go cold. “Apparently, their robes were embroidered, but I wonder what the design was...”

Ebel was awfully skilled at making up convenient lies. Rock was impressed. Meanwhile, the priest seemed to fall for it as his eyes went wide with surprise.

“I see... Do you have any idea what color thread was used for the embroidery?”

“Unfortunately not. All I can say for sure is that my maid is deeply unsettled by how suspicious and scary the group appeared,” Ebel answered as casually as if it were the truth and shrugged.

Just then, the person sitting on the pew behind them suddenly stood up. It was the well-dressed middle-aged man who’d been praying in the sanctuary before they’d arrived.

“Oh, are you—”

The man didn’t stop to hear the priest out as he exited through the thick double doors and gruffly shut them behind him. The disregarded priest seemed a little baffled by his rude behavior.

“...He seems to be in quite the hurry,” he said, unable to keep the discomfit out of his voice.

“Who was that gentleman?” Ebel asked without missing a beat.

“Someone who comes daily to pray. I haven’t asked about his identity...” The priest took a breath to dispel his confusion and looked anxiously at the door. “I believe he is a devout believer as he prays in earnest every day.”

“Then he must have left because we were being too loud,” Ebel said as if he believed that was the reason the man suddenly departed, but one look at his side profile told a different story.

After stealing a glance at his expression, Rock cast her restless gaze down at the brightly colored floor.



WITH nothing else left to gain from the church, Rock and Ebel boarded their carriage and departed the holy church district. An exhausted Phoebe welcomed them outside Mateus Manor when they finally returned.

“Roxy, you’re finally back!”

Lured by the sound of the carriage, he appeared out front as if scrambling away from some monster within the manor.

“What’s wrong, Father?” Rock asked as soon as she stepped out of the carriage.

Phoebe let out a long-suffering sigh before he got to his complaint.

“That maid could be the poster child for all that is annoying. At first, she pestered me with a barrage of worthless questions, and when I said I wasn’t interested in answering, she started blathering on and on by herself. You’d think the girl doesn’t need air with how long her stories go without pause...”

Apparently, Phoebe hadn’t been allowed to spend the time in peace and quiet as he’d wanted. Johanna quickly came running out to meet them, her expression apologetic.

“Was I really *that* annoying, Master Phoebe? You were yawning so much, I thought you were bored of waiting...”

“I was just tired,” Phoebe snarled at her.

As Rock was trying to decide the best way to console her father, Ebel apologized to him first.

“I apologize for the trouble my maid caused you.”

“Are you stuck listening to this never-ending prattling every day, Your Excellency?” Phoebe asked with a wry smile.

“Yes. There aren’t many people in my house, so I’m grateful for Johanna’s lively energy,” Ebel responded without hesitation. Then he added, “Though I must admit I often haven’t a clue what she’s saying...”

How in the world did Johanna process what her employer said? For some reason, she tilted her head and let out a girlish giggle.

“I know it’s not much, but I do my part to make sure Mateus Manor is always filled with cheer.”

“But Johanna, you should know they are both my esteemed guests.” Ebel rubbed his temples to indicate he wasn’t praising her. “It’s rude to ask a bunch of questions just to satisfy your curiosity. Refrain from doing so in the future.”

“Yes, Your Excellency,” Johanna responded cheerfully.

Rock also believed that the manor would never become dark and gloomy with her around. But she doubted she could follow Johanna’s conversational topics if Ebel and Phoebe couldn’t.

“Please prepare tea for us as well.”

“At once, Your Excellency.”

At Ebel’s request, Johanna hurried back inside the manor before showing Rock and the others to the reception room.

It was the same reception room with a portrait of a young Ebel and his father Cyrille that Rock had been shown to during her last visit. Rock studied the painting that captured the father and son before their lives were cursed with a completely different outlook.

The young boy had lost the tender green hue of his eyes and remained within the manor as a werewolf. Meanwhile, his father had passed away and was laid to rest within the quiet mausoleum. Both of them had a gentle kindness to them that’d been lost to the grave.

“I’ve brought your tea.”

Rock and Ebel took a much-needed break over the tea Johanna brewed. After enjoying a few sips, Rock divulged the information they’d obtained at the church to Phoebe. While they hadn’t gathered much news, Phoebe was still fascinated about the details pertaining to the blue robes they’d garnered from their visit.

“Damned robes, huh? Who’d willingly order something like that?”

“If only we could figure that out, we’d probably be able to pin down Krister’s whereabouts.”

The missing person posters were steadily disappearing from the slums.

Some were peeled off by the rain, while others were ripped down by drunks and children playing bad pranks. Nisha seemed to create and rehang new ones every time, but it was only a matter of time before she ran out of energy and money.

“The incense is another important find. If some sorta clergyman really is involved in this, then...”

Rock and Ebel were able to confirm the church smelled of incense that very day.

What if Krister was forced to make the damned blue robes and was harmed after he did? Rock didn't know what reasons or objectives the customer had for doing that, but she felt they were getting closer to the truth.

“We could use a few more clues,” Phoebe groaned with his arms folded. Then his gaze suddenly shifted to Ebel, who was sitting across from him.

Rock followed his gaze and noticed the deep creases in Ebel's handsome forehead. He seemed to be contemplating something.

“What's the matter, Ebel?” she asked, getting him to slowly raise his gaze to meet hers.

“Do you remember the well-dressed man inside the church?”

“Yes.”

He could only mean the middle-aged man who had stormed out of the church while Ebel was speaking with the priest.

“Something about him really bothers me,” he muttered with a grim look. “I heard him run at full speed a few moments after he exited the sanctuary. He seemed to have suddenly remembered he had urgent business while I was talking to the priest.”

Rock also found it strange.

He was supposedly a man who was so devout, he attended church every day to pray. Would such a man really run out of church after not only failing to say goodbye to the priest but even going so far as to ignore him simply because he

remembered some urgent business?

However, there was nothing suspicious about him aside from his quick departure, and they had nothing to go off of to prove he was involved in anything, even if they chose to suspect him.

“Nothing about this sits right.”

“You can say that again...”

“Honestly...”

Phoebe, Rock, and Ebel thought alike here, their expressions equally sullen.

Suddenly, Rock noticed the gaze eating into her. The owner of said gaze was Johanna, and she broke into a big grin when Rock looked at her.

Her purple eyes sparkled with curiosity—maybe she wanted to join the conversation or to ask Rock a question.

“What is it, Johanna?”

Rock’s question was immediately followed by Phoebe clearing his throat loudly beside her. His way of saying “Don’t get her started!”

That gesture alone told Rock just how much trouble her father had dealing with the blond maid while she was away. She always had this image of her father as invincible, so it was surprising he couldn’t hold his own against a teenage girl.

“Johanna, don’t forget your manners.”

Ebel’s reminder caused her to clamp her mouth shut before she rattled off her inquiry. But their serious conversation had hit a dead end, and Rock wanted a change of pace.

“...Oh right, I heard from His Excellency,” Rock began, addressing Johanna to get the conversation going. “Is it true you come from a line of werewolf hunters?”

Out of the corner of her eye, Rock saw Phoebe lean forward with great interest as soon as she brought that topic up. On the other hand, Johanna’s cheery expression instantly fell.

“Do you believe the stories, Master Rock?” she asked in nervous tones.

What she expected to be a light conversation starter proved the opposite with the way Johanna reacted. Rock reflexively shot Ebel a look, but he just carried his teacup to his lips to hide his amused smile. Thinking it strange, Rock decided to just honestly answer her.

“I believed it.”

Johanna smiled bashfully. “Both my parents and my grandfather seem to believe it too.”

“You don’t, Johanna?”

“I hope it is true...” She suddenly started fidgeting and pulling on her pigtails. “But the thing is, neither my parents nor grandfather nor anyone in my parents’ generation had ever seen a werewolf.” Then she glanced at Ebel and sighed. “No one—not a single member of my clan—had until we met His Excellency.”

“Then how did you know you were a clan of werewolf hunters?” Rock asked the most obvious question.

“Because our homes are filled with items that fit the tales,” Johanna replied. “Everything from horrifying executioner swords with nicks in the blade to traps for capturing werewolves to large shackles and torture devices. Yet no one remembers ever using them. We’ve only the stories passed down from generation to generation.”

That sounded like quite a dangerous set of items to have passed down through the generations. It didn’t seem too far-fetched to believe the tales with all that evidence, but Johanna appeared doubtful.

“So, our clan basically threw a huge party when we received the request to serve the Mateus family. My father, mother, and grandfather were ecstatic... They seemed relieved from the bottom of their hearts to learn there really are werewolves out there,” Johanna said with a dry smile. “But as you can see, I’m just an ordinary girl who likes to talk a little more than the rest. If I’m truly the descendant of werewolf hunters, I should have some sort of power to protect His Excellency with...”

“Don’t let that bother you,” Ebel interrupted to console her. “You do your job

very well. That's all that matters."

"Thank you very much, Your Excellency." Despite expressing her gratitude, Johanna appeared ashamed deep down. Pouting, she muttered, "I always wished I had some kind of special power or some skill that would awaken in a moment of crisis."

As far as Rock knew, the Ancient Empire the Werewolf Brotherhood was most active during perished hundreds of years ago. The current imperial dynasty began after that, and since then, it'd reigned as an empire without major wars or political changes.

The reason they didn't know the exact timeframe since the change in dynasties was because the history books had almost all been burned. In any event, centuries had passed, and while some families passed down tales of their Ancient Empire glory days, others ceased to believe it.

Until Rock met Ebel, she too lumped werewolves in with the rest of the ghost stories told in the slums. Rumors abounded about them in the shantytown, but she'd assumed drunks had mistaken a large, hairy man for a werewolf. Of course, she couldn't doubt their existence after she had met one in person.

The real question was: why did the werewolf curse still exist in the modern world?

As Rock became lost in thought, Ebel rose from his chair. His eyes were locked on something outside the window.

"There's a carriage. I didn't plan for any other guests today, though..."

Curious, Rock turned around to see a single carriage parked outside the closed gates at the end of the vast Mateus gardens.

It was an awfully magnificent carriage drawn by two beautiful horses.

An unfamiliar family crest was painted on the carriage doors. Phoebe was first to respond to the crest depicting a balanced scale with azaleas growing up it.

"The Alexis family..."

Rock spun toward her father and saw his jaw was set in a hard line, his expression stiffer than she'd ever seen it before.

“Are you well-acquainted with that family, Your Excellency?” Phoebe asked Ebel, who promptly shook his head.

“I don’t know them well enough to receive an unannounced visit.”

“Then what are they here for...?”

“I hate to think it, but it seems likely they’ve caught on to *you*.”

Ebel looked at Rock, forcing her to quickly come to terms with the situation.

Apparently, the Alexises had successfully pinned down her whereabouts. How or why they did was still up in the air. But the one thing Rock knew for certain was that their visit was an unwanted one.

The carriage door finally swung open as they watched from the reception room’s bay window.

A woman stepped out into the strong orange light cast by the setting sun. The lady wore a sheer veil over her face and an elegant navy-blue dress. There was quite a distance from the manor across the garden to the closed gate, which made it even more difficult to make out her face under the veil.

But Phoebe shoved Rock’s head down under the window to hide her from view.

“Get down, Roxy!” He crouched beneath the window beside her and exhaled a rueful sigh. “There’s no question about it, that’s Laretta Alexis.” Rock didn’t recognize that name, but her father quickly explained, “She’s Vale’s older sister and your aunt.”

“That lady?”

Rock fought off the desire to stand back up and take a second look. Trouble was sure to come if Laretta saw her too.

“Did you ever meet her?” Ebel asked, directing his question to the crouching Phoebe.

“Yeah, in my mercenary days,” Phoebe bit out.

“It seems my father met my mother when he was hired by the Alexis family,” Rock added, since it was a touchy subject for Phoebe.

“I see. So that’s where your love story began, eh?”

“What a beautiful start!”

“That’s not important right now,” Phoebe snipped, uncomfortable with the way Ebel neatly surmised their romance and how Johanna’s eyes sparkled with curiosity.

This wasn’t the time to talk about the charming way they met anyway.

“Why don’t we see what move she makes first?” Ebel suggested in a somber voice just as footsteps could be heard quickly approaching the reception room.

“Pardon the intrusion,” Butler Ludovicus said, bowing before entering the room. “Your Excellency, Lady Alexis wishes to meet with you,” he imparted with a hard expression.

“What business brings her here?” Ebel asked.

“She wouldn’t tell me,” Ludovicus responded solemnly. “She said she’s aware it is rude of her, but she wants to speak with you directly, Your Excellency.”

“Do you think you can send her away?”

“She seems unlikely to move until she has an audience with you.”

From the sound of it, Ludovicus had already tried to send her away. The kindness in his eyes when he looked down at Rock and Phoebe hiding under the bay window told them he had a good grasp on their situation. Someone who knew nothing of their circumstances would have raised an eyebrow or two at their behavior.

“...Show her to the east wing reception room,” Ebel instructed him after a moment of thought.

“As you command.”

“Johanna, prepare tea for our guest,” Ebel told her after seeing Ludovicus bow.

“Yes, sir!”

Once the maid and butler left the room, Ebel turned toward Rock and Phoebe.

“Let’s figure out our strategy while they buy us time.” He smiled soothingly at Rock, who was all nerves. “Rest assured. I will respect your wishes above all else. I intend to handle this matter the way you want.”

Rock didn’t doubt that for a moment. But she was terrified by this unknown aunt who’d hunted her down.

After confirming Lady Alexis had been shown into the opposite wing and no one was lingering outside, Rock, Phoebe, and Ebel retook their seats around the table. Then they put their heads together to figure out a plan of attack.

“Lady Alexis is definitely here for Roxy,” Ebel asserted, pointing to the carriage to back up his claim. “I just caught a glimpse of that man we saw at the church inside her carriage.”

“Then it’s because he saw me there...?”

Now that was a stroke of ill-fortune. The man who’d stormed out of the sanctuary seemed to be connected to the Alexis family. Their objective was clear then.

“But I didn’t give my name. Neither did you, Ebel,” Rock whispered that point.

“He could probably tell by your face or the color of your hair,” Phoebe interjected.

“Is that really enough to go by?”

Rock twirled her wine-colored hair around her finger—the same as her mother’s. It’d grown out lately, and she was just starting to think she needed to cut it before it clashed with her male guise.

“Whatever the case may be, I plan to face Lady Alexis,” Ebel said, his golden eyes studying Rock’s face. “Tell me what you want first, Roxy.”

Rock’s mind was made up long ago.

“The Alexis family is one of the things my mother willingly gave up. I have nothing to do with them, and I’ve no intention of ever getting involved,” she firmly declared. Then she added, “Before Mother passed away, she told me about my father. She told me he’d surely help me. That I should go to the imperial capital and rely on him. But she didn’t tell me a single thing about her

own family. I believe that sums up how she felt and what she'd want me to do."

Phoebe quietly closed his eyes as he listened to Rock. He had a solemn expression, as if in prayer.

"...All right." Ebel nodded and rested his chin on his folded hands. "In that case, there are two paths for us to choose from. Either we completely conceal your existence, or we reveal you to them while expressing your desire to not get involved."

"Can you conceal my existence even after they've found me?"

Rock's question was met with a casual wink.

"I excel at keeping things hidden. I can feign ignorance or stick to my story about your being my mother's relative. Either way, it won't be difficult to insist you aren't Roxy Floria."

It was reassuring when he worded it like it wouldn't be much trouble at all. Rock's relief was shadowed by Phoebe's frown.

"But that won't solve the core issue."

"No, it won't. I can get rid of the lady for a while, but as long as she wants you, she will likely show up out of the blue again and again. She might come directly to you next time."

Ebel shared Phoebe's concerns, but Rock didn't.

"Would a fancy lady really come all the way out to the slums for me...?"

The werewolf count sitting across from her was an eccentric nobleman who enjoyed roaming the slums. Guido and Michaela's reaction when they'd visited Rock's shop proved just how unusual Ebel's proclivities were.

But on the flip side, their visit also showed that even someone of Guido's standing was willing to come to slums with his precious little sister if the circumstances were right.

Rock didn't know what drove Lady Alexis, but it was enough to bring her unannounced to Count Mateus's manor. It was impossible to say she wouldn't hunt Rock down in the slums next.

Rock's shoulders slumped after she thought it over.

"...I guess I can't say she won't, can I?"

"You can't. She seems to have a reason to take action and to be obsessed with you," Ebel said gently. Then he offered up a third plan. "With that in mind, I suggest we purposely reveal you to her."

Rock gagged over that abrupt tactic.

"In other words, I should speak with her directly."

"If the situation calls for it, yes. We need to see what actions she takes first, but if she asks about you, I will say you're here."

Ebel was going to reveal that Rock was there on the premises to the lady who'd come searching for her. And when he did that, the lady's likely next action would be—

"Lady Alexis will most likely ask to see you," Ebel continued in clerical tones. "I will then proceed to introduce you, while also being sure to drive home your desire not to be involved with the Alexis family and how that was also what your mother wanted. I will tell her that since you are an independent adult with your own profession and livelihood secured, you have every right to choose where you want to be and what you want to do."

Then a mischievous grin lit up the count's face as he added, "I don't mind declaring your intentions to marry me too, if you like."

"What? Um, that's a little..." Rock sheepishly trailed off. She hoped they wouldn't have to play that card.

She didn't want to use her relationship with Ebel as an excuse. Even if he wasn't a part of her life, she still wouldn't want anything to do with her mother's family.

"I want to use as few lies as possible to get through this," she told him truthfully. "I get the feeling the ground will fall out from under us if they catch us lying."

"...That's true. We're talking about Laretta here," Phoebe grimly interjected. "Twenty years ago, she was a shrewd, clever woman. When Vale said she was

tired of competing with her sister, Laretta bore down on her until she'd poked holes in all her weaknesses and had Vale emotionally crushed... She's probably become ten times the demon in the decades since."

Phoebe seemed to have a horrible impression of her. His expression was as grim as the story he'd recounted.

"But you aren't alone. You've got His Excellency and me," he reassured, patting Rock on the head. It tickled in more ways than one.

"We're in His Excellency's presence, Father. Don't treat me like a child."

While she'd complained out loud, she was internally relieved.

Not alone—that was an unimaginable blessing.

Ebel watched father and daughter interact with an envious smile.



WITH their strategy settled, Ebel headed straight for the room where Lady Alexis was waiting. Ludovicus showed Rock and Phoebe to the adjoining room.

It looked like a normal reception room at first glance. There were sofas, an oval marble table, a fireplace, and a china cabinet, much like the room they had just been in.

However, a display shelf with a door facing the adjoining room caught Rock and Phoebe's attention. It was a gorgeous piece with detailed carvings, but it was so different from the rest of the furniture, its splendor stood out abruptly.

"This is an observation window," Ludovicus explained with a dashing smile as he opened the shelf door.

The inside was empty except for the light spilling in from the other side of the wall. If Rock looked closely at the hole, she could catch a glimpse of what was going on in the other room.

"I've never seen a trick shelf like this before. It's so neat."

Phoebe glared at Ludovicus while Rock was admiring the peephole.

"Does every room have one of these? Don't tell me you've been peeping on us all this time—"

“Shh. They will hear if you are too loud.”

Ludovicus held a finger in front of his lips, coolly dismissing Phoebe’s valid question.

They could see three people in the other room through the display case. Ebel was seated to greet his guest, Johanna was quietly waiting on him, and then—

“Ah...”

A gasp slipped past Rock’s lips when she saw her. Seen up close, Laretta Alexis truly did resemble her mother, Vale.

Her wine-colored hair was exactly like her mother’s, except for the streaks of gray mixed in. Her face was beautiful but showed signs of exhaustion. She was clearly older than Rock’s mother when she’d passed away. And her eyes were much sharper and foxlike than her mother’s as they cautiously yet gracefully scanned the room.

Rock didn’t know what happened between this lady and her mother. But she couldn’t conceal her shock when the woman looked so much like her to be a mere stranger.

“I sincerely apologize for my sudden visit, Your Excellency.”

Rock was shaken further when Laretta spoke. Her aunt even sounded like her mother.

“I am delighted you made time for me despite my not having made a prior appointment,” Laretta continued, unaware of Rock’s petrification in the adjoining room. Her tone was clipped and matter-of-fact—it didn’t sound the least bit delighted at all.

Sensing the same thing, Ebel calmly responded in kind, “Let’s stop with the stiff formalities, Lady Alexis.” He didn’t look tense or nervous from what Rock could see through the peephole. “What are you doing here? You must have a good reason to show up out of the blue against all decorum.”

He prompted her with a sarcastic edge, his gold eyes narrowing like a wolf watching to see what move its prey was going to take next.

Laretta defiantly stuck her nose up in the air.

“Very well. In that case...” without a smile or a shred of emotion, she cut straight to the point, “I have come here today to ask you to hand over the wine-haired girl said to be in your care, Your Excellency.”

So that is it. Rock sucked in a breath.

She heard Phoebe click his tongue beside her.

Meanwhile, Ebel’s expression remained the same.

“What do you mean by that?” Ebel asked back, provoking her with his tone and unrelenting gaze.

Her response was cold and indifferent.

“I heard her name is Roxy. She is undoubtedly the daughter of my younger sister Valencia who’d absconded years ago. I had tracked her down to a small mountain village but lost her whereabouts completely after my sister passed away and have been searching for her ever since.”

Her face and voice perfectly mirrored Vale’s, but her bearing was entirely different. Rock was creeped out by how she kept all emotion out of her facial expressions and voice. And most of all, she shuddered to think that the woman had been hunting her down without her knowledge, as Phoebe feared.

“I don’t know why she has come into your care, but as long as she is my sister’s daughter, the Alexis family has every right to take custody of her,” Laretta insisted without an ounce of emotion.

“You speak of her as if she is an object you own,” Ebel said with a contemptuous smile. “I will admit that Roxy is here since you have already figured that much out. However...” He purposely paused to give his words more power, his lips curling in a snarl. “What rights do you have to a child you didn’t even raise?”

“I am related to that child by blood.” Laretta’s assertion was said in such a way it made Rock’s blood run cold for the lack of affection there. “That alone grants me every right and responsibility for her.”

“Do you believe that will hold up in the courts, dear lady?”

“This isn’t a matter for the courts. It’s a matter of ethics.” She didn’t even bat

a lash at Ebel's argument. "I am ashamed to say my sister's loose morals led to her unfortunate and miserable death. I couldn't even care for her on her deathbed, but I have since been searching for my niece to do for her what I could not for my sister. I will make her happy when my sister could not. I believe that is a very legitimate reason to take her in."

Her dispassionate words made it impossible to get a read on how she really felt.

Nevertheless, her remark definitely offended both Rock and Phoebe.

"That damn woman...!"

Rock could hear Phoebe grinding his teeth.

There's no way Rock wouldn't take offense at her mother being slandered too. Her mother was the complete opposite of a woman with loose morals—she loved but one man her entire life. Rock knew that painfully well as the person who cared for her before she died.

Ebel also seemed offended by Lauretta's remark.

"Do *not* speak ill of her mother in my house," he ordered with a deep scowl.

"Forgive me, Your Excellency." She apologized on the spot, though even that was frigid and devoid of emotion. "However, I needed you to understand where we are coming from. She is a miserable and unfortunate child. It is not such a strange thing for a blood relative to want to make her happy."

Apparently, Lauretta had arbitrarily decided that Rock was living a miserable and unfortunate life. Of course, that was far from the truth, and Ebel argued the point.

"The Roxy I know is not miserable or unhappy with her life."

Rock closed her eyes to show she agreed. At the very least, she didn't view where she was at now as miserable. If anything, she was happier than ever.

"She has me. And there are many more who care for her," Ebel vouched, and Rock could see Johanna eagerly nodding in agreement beside him. "As far as I have seen, she is plenty happy right now. Surely because your younger sister did a splendid job raising her."

“...Impossible.”

Lauretta’s eyebrow twitched. Her expression didn’t change much, but the comment definitely got a reaction out of her.

“Besides, she still has her father,” Ebel continued, and her shoulders visibly trembled.

“Did you just say she has a *father*? You can’t mean *that* man—”

“Do you *know* her father, Lady Alexis?”

Lauretta didn’t answer his query. She merely squeezed her hands together until they turned white on top of her lap. Catching a glimpse of her reaction, Ebel seemed to perceive it was time to move on to phase two of their plan.

“Why don’t I have her join us then? That way, you can hear how she feels directly from her,” he said emphatically. Then he called out to the hallway. “Ludovicus, please bring her here.”

Of course, Ludovicus was in the adjoining room and not the hallway.

“Are you ready, Lady Roxy?”

Urged by his quiet voice, Rock nodded and followed the butler to the door. She looked back just once to see Phoebe giving her a thumbs-up in front of the observation window.

She knew her father was encouraging her to stick to her decision. Rock responded with a reassuring smile before leaving the room.

Rock entered the east wing’s reception room through the door Ludovicus opened for her. The first thing she saw was Ebel eagerly waiting for her. When their gaze met, he smiled at her gently with his eyes, showing his wordless support.

Johanna stood up straight beside him. Worry weighed on her usually cheerful face.

Encouraged by their presence, Rock held her head high and stepped toward Lauretta.

Seen up close, Lauretta Alexis looked even more like her mother than she did

at a distance. Her wine-colored hair and gray eyes were identical to her mother's. It was almost as if she was looking at a version of her mother that was ten years older and stripped of all warmth and joy.

Interestingly enough, Laretta showed her first signs of true emotion when she saw Rock. Dismay, joy, and maybe a little fear flashed across her face.

"You truly *do*...look just like Valencia...!" she cried out in a hoarse voice.

It'd be a lie to say Rock wasn't at all swayed by her aunt's reaction or her mother's name. But she was only swept up by emotion for a fleeting moment. She quickly recovered and boldly gave her name.

"Hello. My name is Roxy Floria."

Of course, Laretta should know the name she went by. She slightly furrowed her brows.

"Did Valencia tell you to use Floria as your surname?"

"Yes, Mother used it too."

"Then you should call yourself Alexis from now on. You have every right to that name."

By her tone, it was clear Rock's aunt was ordering her to do it. But Rock had zero intention of obeying her.

"I refuse," she declined without hesitation.

Laretta openly scowled then. She seemed offended and completely taken off guard, as if she'd never entertained the thought Rock might refuse. Yet, for all that, she didn't become emotional. She merely shook her head like a mother disappointed with her child's foolishness.

"Why...? You have finally been reunited with your rightful family after being left to fend for yourself all these years. How could you refuse when we have prepared everything to warmly welcome you into the fold?"

"As His Excellency explained, I am with my rightful family—my father."

Laretta finally let her disgust show through when Rock brought Phoebe into the conversation.

“You mustn’t call that man your father. He’s a scum of the earth mercenary who seduced your mother and led her astray.”

And there was no better way to disgust Rock than to besmirch her father and mother.

“Don’t speak ill of my father!” she shouted despite herself, causing Johanna to jump beside her.

Ebel was undisturbed as he watched over Rock with a slight smile. She nodded to him and continued her defense, “Father is a damn powerful and wonderful person who loved Mother and protected her. And now he protects me—”

“Did you just curse?” Laretta interrupted Rock to nitpick at her manner of speech. “You are a lady, Roxy. You mustn’t speak like an ill-bred man.”

“My father taught me how to talk this way to protect myself.”

Rock was a trickster tailor who dressed as a man to get by without incident in the slums. Doing so had made her dreams come true and protected her—especially from the life her mother happily threw away.

“I’ve been living as a man all this time in the imperial capital,” she continued, purposely invoking the tone of speech she used when dressed as Rock the Tailor. “Father recommended it—so that I can protect myself and my identity.”

That was likely enough information for Laretta to realize what Phoebe was trying to protect Rock from. She let out her first irate sigh, as if she had no other way to clear her mounting resentment.

“That man isn’t happy just depriving me of my sister? Now he wants to take my niece away too? The audacity...!”

Rock was ready to argue back when—

“Roxy,” Ebel whispered, urging her to stop.

She’d nothing to gain from arguing with Laretta here. Besides, the conversation would end quicker if she just made her stance clear.

“I will not join your family.” Rock thrust her unshakeable decision at her aunt. “I have my father to protect me.” Then she looked at Ebel and continued after

seeing his smile, “And Count Mateus also...cares for me very much.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw both Ebel and Johanna nod.

I’m not alone. Rock knew that with every fiber of her being.

“And I’m really happy now with all the people I have in my life supporting me.”

After losing her mother, Rock was tormented by the thought she’d lost everything. But that was no longer the case—she was surrounded by more happiness than she thought possible.

“So I’m not going anywhere, ever. I have no intentions of calling myself an Alexis either. This is my answer, Lady Alexis.”

Rock spoke her piece then waited in silence for her aunt’s reaction.

Lauretta Alexis stared down Rock with frigid eyes for what felt like an eternity. But then she sighed. Loudly enough, it seemed, to help her organize her thoughts.

“I now see that you have been poisoned by Fredericks Berwick.” After uttering Rock’s father’s real name, she emotionlessly remarked, “You will surely come to regret the decision you made this day, Roxy.”

“What do you mean by that?” Rock asked back, but Lauretta didn’t answer her.

All emotion hidden by a cold mask of indifference, she stood and bowed to Ebel.

“I apologize for the scene, Your Excellency. Thank you for making time for me today.”

“I am happy to help if it has helped you understand the situation,” Ebel said, but Lauretta refused to give any response indicating she actually accepted what happened. “Ludovicus, please show Lady Alexis out.”

The door opened in response and Ludovicus appeared.

Lauretta silently walked past him before the butler finished bowing. She swept out of the room with a face that seemed to have all the emotion sucked

out of it and then turned around.

Her gray eyes locked on to Rock for a whole second.

Those eyes, which seemed to be the frozen over version of her mother's, gleamed like a hunter's after he'd found his prey.

"...!"

Rock flinched despite herself, and Laretta disappeared into the hallway at that moment.

"She's one unfathomable lady," Ebel groaned after confirming through the window that the Alexis carriage had left the premises.

"I couldn't agree more..." Rock sighed.

That term—unfathomable—fit her to a tee. The sheer lack of emotion on her face made it hard to believe the woman was her mother's biological sister. Yet their features were so terribly similar, it made Rock shudder.

Even so, Rock's mind was made up. Laretta had left on that threatening note, but Rock doubted she'd ever regret her decision.

She wouldn't, *would* she?

"...I hope everything is settled now," Rock muttered as eerie chills crept down her spine.

The final look Laretta gave her made Rock feel like she was about to be hunted down.

Chapter 4: Waiting for the Chance to be Reunited

ROCK and Phoebe had dinner with Ebel that night. The meal Johanna had pulled out all the stops to prepare was incredibly delicious, but Rock's thoughts were too preoccupied with what'd happened with her aunt to truly enjoy it.

"She looked just like Mother..." she muttered, recalling the visage that'd been burned into her eyes. Though it seemed Phoebe disagreed as he shrugged off her comment.

"You really think so? You could *easily* tell them apart, even when they stood side by side."

"I think they would've looked perfectly alike if Mother had lived another ten years."

"I doubt it. Vale was always the pretty one."

Apparently, *that* was the point Phoebe wanted to emphasize.

"Makes sense to me," Ebel chuckled before Rock could respond. Phoebe shot him a death glare, to which the count raised his hand in apology. "Pardon me... Did you and your wife elope?"

"I'm not sure if you can *call* her my wife... We didn't officially marry," Phoebe replied, sounding loath to admit it as he glanced at Rock.

"I don't see a problem with that," Rock said. It was strange for slum dwellers to adhere to imperial capital law. She continued to tell the tale in her father's place because he seemed uncomfortable recounting it in front of her. "Mother left home to pursue Father, so I don't think it counts as 'eloping,' in the strictest sense of the word."

"Ah, is *that* what happened?"

"She fled home for the sake of love! How lovely!"

After hearing Rock's explanation, Ebel gave an understanding nod, and Johanna's eyes sparkled. Phoebe became instantly uncomfortable and tore off a

piece of his roll with his teeth instead of using a knife.

Unfortunately for him, this was not a dinner table that would be silenced by such behavior.

“I would just *love* to hear stories about when you and your wife first began falling in love! Were you dressed as a beautiful woman when you first met her too? Who confessed first? I’d also love to hear about the tales surrounding Master Rock’s birth!!!”

Phoebe clammed up as Johanna hounded him with a million questions.

“It’s rude to ask so many questions at once, Johanna.”

On the surface, Ebel scolded his maid for pestering Phoebe, but he seemed equally interested. He turned toward Phoebe to ask his own question.

“Lady Alexis seemed to have a poor opinion of you. Is that because she believes you responsible for her sister leaving the family?”

“I doubt that’s the...only reason why.” Phoebe blew out a long breath, as if preparing himself to tell the truth. Then he looked directly at Rock before continuing. “Lauretta and Vale were never—and I mean *ever*—on good terms. If anything, I’d say things were always stormy and strenuous between the sisters.”

“Really? But...”

It didn’t seem that way to me, Rock thought.

Lauretta Alexis seemed to lose her composure when she saw Rock. She probably saw a shadow of her younger sister in Rock from when she was her age. Just like how Rock sensed the biological connection between Lauretta and her mother.

She hadn’t interacted with Lauretta enough to know her innermost heart, but her reaction wasn’t that of someone who hated her sister.

“They were always competing for who’d take over the family while the former lord was still alive,” Phoebe explained, the corners of his mouth turned down. “He believed making them compete like that would raise a better heir. Everything was a competition: their studies, how they carried themselves, even how they interacted with their parents. They were even encouraged to knock

each other down a peg. Vale was scolded by her parents whenever she was outdone by Laretta.”

It was suffocating just thinking about living that way.

“Then your wife was also running away from that competition?” Ebel asked as Rock was rendered speechless by the story.

“That was definitely part of it,” Phoebe responded with a sullen look. “But Vale never hated Laretta, despite being forced to compete with her. Laretta probably felt the same. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have paid people for years to find her niece.”

Phoebe’s side profile gave away the pain he felt when speaking about Vale. Maybe he knew something more about why her mother ran away. Some secret he wasn’t willing to divulge here.

“I think that’s why...Laretta directed all her hatred toward me.” Phoebe heaved another tormented sigh. “By hating *me*, she can pretend Vale didn’t betray her.”

“...There are as many different sibling relationships as there are people in the world,” Ebel intoned in a low, rumbling voice.

The Linus siblings were the siblings he knew the best, and Rock knew just how close Guido and Michaela were. Compared to them, her aunt and mother had a more complicated, twisted relationship.

Perhaps her desire to take Rock in had to do with more than just wanting an heir. Something deeper and more complicated might’ve been driving her.

“I wonder if that was enough to make Lady Alexis give up,” Rock put out there. Neither Ebel nor Phoebe seemed to think so.

“It’s hard to say she will when she left saying you’ll regret it,” Ebel said, his brow furrowing with concern.

Rock couldn’t fathom what she meant by that.

What was she going to regret? She highly doubted it meant she would regret not becoming a member of the Alexis family, in the most basic sense. It’d sounded more like a threat than anything.

“Either way, you should pay extra attention to your surroundings and safety for now,” Ebel instructed. Then he gave her a reassuring smile. “I am prepared to keep you safe no matter what it takes. Rely on me any time.”

“Thank you, Ebel. I’m currently living with my father, so I doubt there’ll be much trouble,” Rock responded bashfully.

Johanna’s expression lit up as if she’d just discovered something absolutely incredible.

“You have two knights in shining armor to protect you, eh, Master Rock?! How *wonderful!*”

“This girl is impressed by even the most trivial of things.”

Whether she didn’t hear Phoebe’s grumbled jab or simply ignored it, Johanna stomped her feet on the ground for an altogether different annoyance.

“If only I had the abilities of a werewolf hunter, I could’ve protected you alongside His Excellency and Master Phoebe...!”

“Th-Thanks. The sentiment alone makes me happy, Johanna,” Rock rushed out.

She really was happy—spending time around the dinner table with people she loved helped her finally regain her cool after how shaken she’d been feeling since speaking with her aunt.

She reveled in the joy of not being alone.

Ebel also seemed to be of the same mind.

“This has turned into quite the lively dinner, no?” he said with a bright smile. “I would love to sit down to a meal with you all again soon.”

His words meant even more because he didn’t have a family of his own.

“It would be my pleasure!” Rock accepted the invitation with all her heart.



ROCK and Phoebe decided to leave Mateus Manor after dinner. Ebel suggested they stay the night, but Rock wanted to get home before the date changed because she needed to open her shop early the next morning.

Fortunately, the majority of roads inside the imperial capital were well-lit by streetlights. There were no hindrances to taking out the carriage, and Ebel happily lent his to them—though he was terribly disappointed Rock couldn't stay longer.

"I'll have Iniel take you home. You should be back before midnight if you hurry."

Iniel, Ebel's coachman, was already waiting for them in the garden. He had the berline carriage all hooked up to the two horses, ready to go.

"Today was a day well spent. Thank you, Roxy." Ebel longingly took Rock's hand in his as he saw her off at the carriage.

"I'm also so happy to have spent today with you."

As Rock smiled, Ebel kissed the back of her hand. Then he whispered in a soft voice so Phoebe couldn't hear.

"Let's visit your mother's grave someday soon too. It's a promise."

"Y-Yes...please do come with me."

It wasn't just the lingering soft touch of his lips on the back of her hand that made Rock's heart flutter.



ROCK stared out the moving carriage's window at Mateus Manor as it steadily grew more distant. In the dark of night, Ebel disappeared from view in the twinkling of an eye, and that saddened her.

With him out of sight, she leaned back into her seat, and Phoebe quickly pounced with a well-timed question, as if he was waiting for her to finish.

"Planning a trip with His Excellency?"

"What?! H-How did you...?!"

Becoming flustered was the same as saying yes

But Rock couldn't help panicking, and her father frowned with exasperation at her reaction.

"That's what'll happen if you visit Vale's grave."

Apparently, her father had excellent hearing on par with a werewolf's.

"Y-You could call it a trip, but it's not like any funny business is going to happen..." Growing rapidly more uncomfortable by the second, Rock pulled her feet onto the seat and hugged her knees. "And it's not like we've decided to go alone or anything! Why don't you join us, Father?"

"You want to take your father on your pre-wedding vacation? I think not."

"P-Pre—it's nothing *like* that! I swear!"

"Says you." Phoebe grinned like a cat before gently ruffling Rock's wine-colored hair. "Well, as your guardian, I can't say I wholeheartedly approve. But I won't stop you."

"*Uggh...* I keep telling you it's not that kind of trip—"

Trying to defend herself further would only dig her a deeper hole. Despite knowing that, Rock still tried to explain herself.

But her excuse was cut short by the whole carriage shaking in its frame. It shook so hard, Rock and Phoebe were knocked out of their seats.

"What was that?!"

"Whoa! What just happened?"

The carriage ceiling creaked and groaned just as they reacted to the situation. The berline carriage had a solid top that wouldn't break even if rocks fell on it, but it seemed like something especially heavy was on top.

Even the coachman realized something was off. He must've pulled hard on the reins since the carriage tilted to the side as the horses brayed.

"UWAH!"

Rock was about to be thrown into the seat facing her. Phoebe caught her just in time and glared outside the window.

"What happened?!"

The imperial capital's nightscape spread outside the window. Seeing as it was still a brightly illuminated, clean cityscape, they hadn't made it out of the aristocrat district yet. Were they in someone's garden? Or was it a park? Rock

could see a gorgeous garden illuminated by the stars beyond a stone gate covered in ivy.

The small window connecting to the coachman's seat opened, and Iniel shouted to them while Rock was still trying to process the situation.

"Something's wrong! Please get off!"

Hearing those orders, Phoebe reached out to open the carriage door. But a huge, dark figure loomed over the window just as he was about to wrench the door open.

Glittering gold eyes, pointed ears, a large mouth full of fangs, and a body covered in black fur—

"...Ebel?" Rock instinctively uttered that name when she saw the werewolf peering in through the window.

The werewolf suddenly took a step back and then swung up its large arm that was thicker than an oak log.

"Watch out!"

Phoebe yanked Rock to him just as the carriage was struck by a powerful force and fell sideways with a bang. They were tossed around inside the carriage and slammed into what used to be the ceiling. Shortly after Rock lifted her head, the door was ripped off, and a massive shadow fell on them as they collapsed in a heap inside.

"Wha—? What's going on?"

The werewolf silently peered into the flipped-over carriage, ignoring Phoebe's moaned question. As soon as its golden eyes landed on Rock, it gently scooped her into its arms.

"Th-Thank you...very much," Rock thanked it in a daze.

Rock believed the werewolf was Ebel up until that moment.

She didn't know what went wrong with the carriage, but she wholly believed that he'd transformed into a werewolf and ran to her rescue.

But this werewolf held her under one arm and jumped into the air, leaving

Phoebe pinned under the wreckage. It leaped onto the vine-covered stone gate and cautiously assessed the sideways carriage below.

“Why...?”

Something’s wrong, Rock thought.

Ebel would’ve helped Phoebe up and checked on Iniel and the horses, not just escape with her.

She could see the toppled, broken carriage on top of the road illuminated by the round streetlights. It looked like Iniel cut the white horses loose at the last second as they both stood there unharmed. But Iniel himself was lying face down on the ground, and Phoebe was finally starting to pull himself out from under the carriage.

Doubts rising fast, Rock fearfully looked up at the werewolf.

Unfortunately, werewolves were indistinguishable from each other.

So far, aside from Ebel, the only other werewolf she had seen was Guido Linus. There was almost no difference in their appearance, except for Guido looking a little bigger, which might’ve had more to do with their original physique.

And the werewolf holding her now was—

“Not him...”

Tailor Rock had measured Ebel in his werewolf form as well. So she was able to tell that the werewolf holding her wasn’t him. This one had narrower shoulders and was slightly shorter.

In other words—

“Father!” Rock screamed at the top of her lungs. “It’s not *him!*”

A terrifying look flashed across Phoebe’s face as he raised it to look at her.

“I’m coming for you right now!”

However, his reliable words were dashed by the werewolf abandoning its perch on the stone gate to hop over to one tree branch and then the next inside the garden.



“Let go! Let go of me, you mutt!”

Rock thrashed around, trying to free herself of the stranger’s furry arms. But the werewolf didn’t relax his hold on her even as she struggled with all her might. He stood perfectly still on top of what should’ve been an unsteady branch, despite it being a large tree.

“Would you mind not struggling so much?” it said in an unfamiliar voice. “I *want* to transport you safely. Please.”

A not-so-young male voice came from the fanged mouth.

“Who are you?! What do you want with me?!”

The werewolf jumped again without answering Rock’s questions. This time, he leaped on top of an off-fountain inside the garden. Then another branch. And then he sprung on top of a wooden gazebo roof that’d looked much farther away a moment ago at an unbelievable speed.

“Father! Father!” Rock screamed for Phoebe until her voice went hoarse, even though she couldn’t see him anymore.

The nighttime garden was rapidly growing more distant.

Rock knew she was being carried away—kidnapped. She couldn’t escape.

“Roxy! Damn you! GIVE ME BACK MY DAUGHTEEEEEEEEER!”

Phoebe’s enraged shout echoed from a hopeless distance.



THE werewolf bounded through the starlit imperial capital carrying Rock.

Compared to the overcrowded slums where poorly constructed dwellings were crammed into any open space, the use of land in the aristocrat district was luxurious, to say the least. The streets were wide and there was plenty of space between the houses. It must’ve been hard remembering where to go, Rock thought, with so few buildings to use as landmarks and just the streetlights to guide the way.

“Put me down!” Rock continued to shout as her last means of struggle.
“Return me to my father!”

The werewolf shook his head as he lopped down the road.

“Quiet. I don’t want anyone else to see me.”

“Mmph...!”

A hairy werewolf hand covered Rock’s mouth. After that, she was carried off somewhere without even being able to scream.

How long was she stuck in that position?

A blinding light suddenly stung Rock’s eyes that’d grown accustomed to the dark. She inadvertently squeezed her eyes shut, just as she felt the werewolf land softly on something.

It appeared he’d descended on the balcony of some mansion. The large window leading indoors from the balcony was left open, and the dazzling light was spilling out from there.

The werewolf strolled inside through the opening with her in his arms.

Inside was blindingly bright. But Rock strained her eyes despite the pain because she wanted to know where he’d brought her.

It looked like someone’s bedroom.

She saw a canopy bed, an exquisitely carved dresser, and a round table decorated with a full bouquet—clearly a young lady’s room. All of the furnishings were made of finely polished, expensive wood, and the sheer silk hanging from the canopy and the bedding were unified by the same soft coral color. Given the furnishings’ splendor, she suspected it was a mansion in the aristocrat district.

“We’ve arrived, Roxy.”

The werewolf spoke Rock’s real name. Then he gently lowered her onto the plush rug.

Rock immediately jumped back and glared daggers at the werewolf looming in the coral pink bedroom.

“Who the hell *are* you?! Why’d you bring me here?!”

The werewolf stared back at Rock with his gold eyes. But the bedroom door

quietly opened before he could answer.

Rock's eyes swung toward the door, and she was rendered speechless by the person standing there.

"...Lady Alexis!!!"

It was Laretta Alexis—the aunt who looked frighteningly like her mother.

She ran over to the werewolf, placed both hands on his broad chest, and cried out in a shaky voice.

"I'm so glad you're safe, darling..."

The werewolf's expression softened as he stared lovingly down at Laretta.

"I was able to get the job done without a single injury, thanks to this power." He looked over at Rock and continued in a satisfied tone, "And our precious child is safely with us now too."

"H-HUUUUUUH?!" Rock raised her voice in utter disbelief over that.

Laretta looked at Rock. Those gray eyes that were identical to her mother's misted.

"Aaah, Roxy... You *finally* came back to us."

Her voice sounded terribly gentle, loving, and even compassionate—the complete opposite of the frigidness that'd permeated it at Mateus Manor.

"W-Wait just a minute! I didn't **willingly** come—"

"This is your home now. I had this room prepared just for you. Isn't it lovely?"

Laretta smiled, completely ignoring Rock's protests.

Her smile was beautiful but deranged. Or perhaps it was Rock not knowing her true nature that made it seem that way.

Chilled, Rock shuddered.

"I will make you happy now that Valencia cannot."

The werewolf nodded along with Laretta's seemingly kind words.

"You needn't worry about a thing anymore. We will protect you."

“Go to hell!” Rock was indignant. “You’re bloody insane, trying to act like my family after you attacked my carriage and kidnapped me! I’m not your damn child and I never will be! I’m the daughter of Fredericks Berwick and Vale Floria!!!” she snapped as loud as her voice allowed.

Lauretta gave the werewolf a confused look as if to say, “Why is she reacting like this?”

The werewolf placed his furry hand on her shoulder to soothe her.

“Roxy is still confused, it seems. It’s very late. We should let her rest.”

“You’re right, darling...”

They seemed to be husband and wife, but neither of them was in their right mind as far as Rock could tell. Not only did they seem to have no guilt over kidnapping Rock, but they actually acted as if they were in the right. As if they’d some sort of legal claim to bring her home as their child.

Who the hell is this werewolf anyway?

Thanks to her interaction with Ebel, she wasn’t scared in his presence, but werewolves were still oddities. Did this man also unleash the power of the statue and end up cursed?

And if this man truly was Lauretta’s husband, then that’d mean Lord Alexis was a werewolf.

First Ebel, then Guido, and now Lord Alexis—Rock was horrified that the werewolf curse was steadily taking hold of the imperial capital’s nobility.

“I don’t want to be here! Let me go back to my father...!” Rock shouted as she held a hand to her aching head. “Please let me go! This isn’t my home...!”

Lauretta looked pleadingly at the werewolf after hearing Rock’s complaint.

“Darling, Roxy is acting funny...”

“She *is*. She must be terribly confused.” The werewolf took a breath, then called outside the door. “Danilo, can you come in here?”

“Yes, my lord.”

The door opened and in stepped a short, middle-aged man. Judging by his

well-kept attire, he might've been their butler, but Rock recognized him from elsewhere. He was the man she'd seen praying in the sanctuary when she'd visited the holy church district with Ebel.

"I want to let Roxy get some rest. She probably doesn't know her way around yet, so please tell her what she needs to know," the werewolf instructed, and the stubby man called Danilo swept into a respectful bow.

"As you command, my lord," he said, then courteously suggested, "Perhaps you should change soon... The little miss probably can't relax with you in that form."

Being called "little miss" was the final straw that pushed Rock over the edge.

"That's true. Although Roxy seems rather used to seeing a werewolf."

Or so she thought until the werewolf said that. She was shaken to the core.

He saw through me.

He'd realized Rock had seen a werewolf before—not only that, but he seemed to notice she was so familiar with werewolves not to be scared out of her wits by one.

I can't let them find out about Ebel.

Rock steadied her breathing and forced herself to calm down.

In the meantime, Lord and Lady Alexis seemed to have finished handing over control of the situation to Danilo.

"Take care of her, Danilo."

"Please be extra careful with my daughter."

The werewolf put a supportive arm around Laretta's shoulders and escorted her out of the coral pink room.

"Young Miss, I am Danilo," the man gingerly introduced himself to her. "I hope we can get along—"

Obviously, Rock wasn't interested in being friendly with him. She leveled him with a penetrating glare.

"You were the man I saw at the church."

Danilo instantly paled.

“Y-Yes...I am.”

“According to the priest, you are a very devout believer who often attends Mass. Can you truly turn a blind eye to someone being kidnapped right in front of you...?”

Imitating her father’s way of threatening people with words had an immediate effect. Danilo instantly fell to his knees to beg forgiveness.

“Please forgive me...! I certainly do believe in God.”

“Then please bring me back home.”

“I...can’t do that.”

“Why not? Do you believe God won’t judge you for this sin?”

Finding Danilo particularly tractable, Rock doubled-down. She normally didn’t even like talking about God, but she was willing to do so to get out of this situation.

“Does God approve of *kidnapping*?”

All the color drained completely from Danilo’s pudgy face with that last remark.

“Please forgive me, Young Miss. I haven’t forsaken God. I just—” He paused, as if needing a moment to pick the right words. “Um...if you know about werewolves, then you should also know the kind of power His Lordship has acquired.”

Rock didn’t respond. She gnawed her inner lip in silence.

Of course she knew about werewolves. She had a good idea of their power too. She’d also seen the moment that power was acquired once before.

“We committed a grave sin,” Danilo continued to confess. “His Lordship turned his back on the natural order and offered himself up to the werewolf curse of his own volition.”

“Wh-Why would he do that?” Rock asked despite herself.

Danilo said it was of his own volition, but Guido had also acted like unleashing

the curse was what he desired most in the world too. But once he'd regained his senses, it became apparent that he was being controlled by the werewolf statue.

With that in mind, wasn't it also possible that Lord Alexis acted like it was what he wanted when that really wasn't the case?

"It was all for his wife," Danilo revealed, his voice shaking. "He did it to support and protect his dear wife."

"Oh, come on. He didn't need the werewolf power for that—"

"But he did," Danilo vehemently interrupted Rock's objection. "It is only with the werewolf's power that His Lordship and Her Ladyship were able to obtain you, Young Miss." He held up his hand to prevent Rock from arguing and deeply bowed his head. "I understand your side of things. I do. But it is my hope that you will at least hear them out. They were distressed and prepared enough to make this sacrifice," he insisted, keeping his eyes on the ground to escape further questioning from her.

"It's unreasonable to ask me to listen to a bloody thing they have to say when you guys KIDNAPPED me! I don't give a *damn* about you people! Send me back! Let me go home to my father!"

No matter how much or how loud Rock complained—

"Please forgive me, Young Miss."

Danilo just apologized without further explanation.



AFTER Rock grew tired of questioning him, Danilo pulled out a nightgown for her to use before hastily leaving the room.

"Please let me know if you need anything. I will be in the room next door."

In other words, he was letting her know he'd come running if he heard her making a break for it.

To make matters worse, he locked the door behind him, trapping Rock in the bedroom. She could open the window, but she learned she was on the third floor when she stepped out on the balcony. There weren't any trees for her to

climb down, and she wasn't brave enough to jump for it just yet.

"I guess I could make a cloth escape rope..."

She raked her gaze over the room for anything she could use, but the only useable cloths were the sheer silk canopy, thin sheets, and the nightgown. She doubted silk could support her weight, and the nightgown wouldn't get her past the third floor.

Rock stepped forward to see if there was anything else when her legs suddenly buckled. She fell back on her butt and hugged her quaking knees.

"What the hell...?"

Nothing made sense.

Her carriage was attacked, a werewolf kidnapped her, and her aunt was trying to force her into becoming her daughter. And if *that* wasn't bad enough, the werewolf was her uncle—Lord Alexis.

He'd supposedly purposefully gotten himself cursed for his wife...

"He's crazy... A curse is just a bloody curse!"

Rock was indignant. She'd seen Ebel's suffering and Guido's change up close.

There was no good reason in the world to rely on the power of those accursed statues.

On the other hand, Rock was becoming more aware of her current powerlessness.

She'd been ripped from her father without even getting a chance to make sure he was all right. The same went for Iniel. Had Ebel heard the news yet?

Will they find me?

She hated wanting someone to save her.

If only I'd the strength to escape on my own, I could get out of this situation without getting anyone else involved.

Maybe this is the kind of situation that makes people seek power. But I will NEVER rely on that curse to save me, no matter what comes my way, Rock vowed to herself as she tightened her arms around her knees on top of the

floor.



A new day dawned before she knew it. Apparently, she'd fallen asleep on the floor.

Rock cautiously raised her head from her knees and scanned her surroundings. What she saw was a warm, coral pink bedroom, which inevitably reminded her of the prior night's events and her role as a prisoner in this gilded cage.

"Ow..."

Her head hurt. Maybe she was more worn out than she'd realized.

After all, a lot had happened yesterday. She'd visited the Mateus family mausoleum with Ebel, entered a church, met Lauretta for the first time, and then got kidnapped all before the day ended. It was hard to believe all that had happened in a day.

Rock staggered to her feet and started thinking of her next move with her aching head. Obviously, she didn't want to stay there long. She needed to do whatever it took to escape.

She opened the window and stepped out onto the third-floor balcony again. The rising morning sun was unquestionably starting to illuminate the gorgeous aristocrat district townscape. The emperor's palace was within sight, and Rock strained her eyes to see it and its surroundings.

Somewhere in this district was Mateus Manor, which she'd visited several times. All she had to do was make her way there. If she just knew where it was in relation to her current location...

But she heard a noise come from the hallway before she could pinpoint it. It sounded like a rolling cart and two pairs of feet approaching her room.

Rock quickly pulled back inside the bedroom, closed the window, and braced herself. There was a knock at the door seconds later.

"Good morning, Roxy. Are you awake?"

That voice belonged to Lord Alexis, the werewolf who'd kidnapped her.

Rock took a steadying breath and answered, "Yes."

"I'm coming in then."

The door opened.

But it was a man Rock didn't recognize who stepped inside.

He looked older than her father with his deep gray hair. He was on the short side with a thin build and wore fine, black velvet clothing with gold thread embroidery. A smile lit his thin eyes, which stood in contrast with his stiff, thick eyebrows.

His eyes were gold.

"You already finished getting dressed? It isn't proper to wear the same clothing you had on yesterday," the man lightly scolded her in a familiar voice as he pointed to the chest of drawers beside the bed. "You'll find several outfits inside. They all belong to you. Wear what you like."

Rock didn't respond. She cautiously assessed the man's face, which finally made him realize what was wrong.

"Oh, right. This is our first time meeting like this." He swept into a courteous bow and introduced himself. "My name is Placido Alexis. I'm Lauretta's husband and your uncle." Then he looked over his shoulder and introduced the young girl who'd followed him in. "This is our maid Alice. You can ask her for help with things you may feel uncomfortable asking Danilo about."

The maid with walnut-colored hair bowed silently.

Alice looked to be around Johanna's age. She seemed oddly nervous as she kept her face blank but blinked an awful lot.

"Alice, prepare breakfast."

"Yes, milord."

Upon Placido's orders, Alice rolled a large cart into the bedroom. She quickly moved the plates from the cart to the flower-decorated round table. During that time, Placido watched Rock with a soft smile that twinkled in his gold eyes.

"I bet you're hungry. How do you feel about eating while chatting with me?"

Rock was certainly famished. But she didn't have an appetite.

"Are you telling me to eat the food prepared by my kidnapper?" Rock couldn't stop herself from sniping back. Alice's hand stopped in the middle of laying out the food. "I think not."

Placido glanced over at the maid before returning Rock's question with one of his own. "I had a delicious breakfast prepared for you, but...are you saying you suspect the food?"

"I can't trust *anything* served by you," Rock boldly affirmed.

Placido's smile didn't waver as he told the maid, "Alice, you can return to your other duties."

"...Are you certain?"

"I'll take care of the rest. Roxy still needs time to calm down."

Rock snorted. There was nothing to calm down about, but Alice said nothing as she expressionlessly left the room.

After seeing the maid out, Placido promptly continued her work. He poured water from the pitcher into two china cups and held them both out to Rock.

"You can choose which one you want. I'll drink the other."

Rock was hesitant. He seemed to just be after gaining her trust. Next, he asked Rock to choose her own lightly baked bread, soup, and fruit. He placed what she didn't select in front of his own seat. It seemed like he was accustomed to serving food as the table was swiftly set with breakfast for two.

"It's ready. Come, let's eat," Placido said, pulling out a chair for Rock to sit. When she didn't move, he flashed a knowing smile and changed out the chair for another. "Did you want to choose your own chair too? Forgive me for not noticing sooner."

That wasn't why Rock didn't move, but it seemed the conversation wouldn't get anywhere until she sat down.

She reluctantly plopped down on the second chair he pulled out for her.

"Enjoy," Placido said, sitting opposite of her.

He took a sip of water and bit into the bread. He also elegantly scooped up some of the steaming hot soup on his spoon and closed his eyes as if savoring the taste.

This was probably his way of showing her it wasn't a trap. Poison or no poison, Rock wasn't in the mood to eat with her kidnapper.

"You aren't going to eat?" Placido eventually asked.

"I don't feel like eating," she answered with a scowl. "I just want to go home."

His expression grew awfully gentle then.

"I'm willing to let you go back from time to time if you become our child. Back to your father, Fredericks Berwick."

Rock's eyes went round with shock.

She was surprised not only by the fact he said she could go back but also that he'd called himself her uncle and Phoebe her father.

This was the same man who'd referred to her as "our precious child" when speaking to Laretta.

"And here I thought you were trying to become my father yourself," Rock shot back, and still Placido responded with a sort of warm kindness.

"Of course, it is my and Laretta's greatest desire for you to become our child. But I also want to respect the life you've lived thus far, including your biological parents."

Talk is cheap, Rock thought.

He might be trying to cajole her into letting down her guard with every intention of going back on his word once he won her over.

Honing every skill she'd learned in the slums, Rock cautiously listened to what he had to say.

"Laretta has been moping about near always these days." Placido frowned with pain when he mentioned his wife. "As you know, we don't have any children. She has become more hurt by that fact as we've aged. I told her I'm fine with adopting an heir, but she's obsessed with it being blood-related."

“And that’s where I come in?” Rock asked.

“It seems Laretta became terribly depressed when your mother, Valencia, left the house,” he solemnly told her. “It became even worse after she learned your mother ran off with a mere mercenary. But she still tracked her down and sent people to keep an eye on her so that she could offer a lending hand if she ever needed one. I remember her being very pleased when she heard the stories of you growing up.”

That all matched up with what Phoebe had told Rock about spies poking into her and her mother’s life while they lived in that rural mountain village.

“But we lost all track of your whereabouts after your mother passed away. Laretta nearly lost her mind, she was so frantic. She tried every means possible to find you, but there wasn’t so much as a trace for years.”

She probably never imagined her niece was living in the capital slums disguised as a man. Phoebe’s plan to hide in plain sight worked like a charm.

“Then we heard the rumors about you attending Duke Linus’s daughter’s birthday party a few weeks ago.”

Rock was shaken at this. She definitely remembered standing out more than she should have at that party.

“Rumors had it that there was a beautiful, young lady with wine-colored hair at the party. Count Mateus was her chaperone for the evening, but her identity was a mystery, and she was said to look a lot like Laretta in her heyday.”

Placido stopped speaking to see Rock’s reaction.

When she pressed her lips in a flat line, refusing to speak, he let out a light chuckle.

“We’ve been searching ever since—for you, Roxy.” Then he began to plead with her. “Won’t you please grant Laretta’s greatest wish? Her deepest desire is to have her own child. If you do, I’ll do whatever I can to make your wishes come true too. I don’t even mind if you go see your father. Laretta won’t be happy about it, but I believe it’s the right thing to do.”

Rock couldn’t help but marvel at the whole thing after hearing the chain of

events that led to this moment. When she spoke with him like this, Placido Alexis came across as a kindly gentleman who loved his wife.

But this was the same man who'd attacked Ebel's carriage last night and abducted her while leaving Phoebe and Iniel to die on the roadside.

And then there was what Danilo had told her about Placido willingly offering himself up to the werewolf curse for Lauretta's sake.

Rock stared back at Placido's gold eyes from across the table. It was the exact same golden shade Ebel and Guido had.

"Do my eyes bother you?" Placido pointed to his eyes, noticing the intensity of her gaze. "You likely know this already, but this isn't their natural color. They became this way the day I obtained the werewolf curse." He took a sip of water, breathed in, and then straightened in his chair. "Roxy, I've been meaning to ask you—you know another werewolf besides me, don't you?"

Rock knew he was already on to her, but she still didn't answer him.

Placido also seemed to guess the reason for her silence.

"From what I heard from Lauretta," he looked straight into Rock's eyes and gave away what he knew, "it appears the young Count Mateus has the same color eyes I do."

I can't answer. I shouldn't answer. I must never let my words destroy Ebel's reputation or life.

Placido smiled as he saw Rock bite her lip.

"You don't want to tell me, eh? I wonder what he *is* to you," he said, then lightly shook his head. "Rest assured, I'm neither trying to pry into his life nor spread bad rumors about him. I simply wanted to see whether he was a kindred soul or not."

Kindred soul. Those two words nagged at Rock.

Was he implying all werewolves shared the same motives? That certainly didn't seem the case to her.

"As far as I know, the werewolf curse can only be obtained from an ancient relic—the werewolf statue—which houses it," Placido explained. "The

Brotherhood gifted me one such statue from which I received the curse. I just want to know if there are others like me out there.”

“...The Brotherhood?”

Rock accidentally broke her silence.

She had a terrible feeling about where this was going. She’d heard about the Brotherhood from Phoebe, Ebel, and even Johanna.

“I’m speaking of the Werewolf Brotherhood, Roxy.” Placido spoke the cult’s full name, exactly as she’d heard it before. “Lauretta and I offered up our prayers there, all so that she could have peace of mind and that her wish would come true.”

No matter how hard Phoebe and Ebel searched, there were only a few measly records left about the Brotherhood. Johanna’s werewolf hunter family only had their torture devices to go by, and Rock had come to believe that the truth about them had been forever buried in the past.

However, the Werewolf Brotherhood still existed.

The person sitting across from her had sought out the werewolf’s power to grant his desires—and succeeded.

“But you already *knew* that, didn’t you?”

Placido was smiling.

It was a gentle smile without an ounce of malicious intent.

Even Rock, who’d come across every kind of human in the slums, saw a genuinely good person in that expression. His was the face of a man who wholeheartedly loved his wife every minute of every day.

“Werewolves aren’t monsters. This is a wonderful power that gives hope to the powerless. If you’re already acquainted with one, then you should know that too. Am I wrong, Roxy?”

Rock found herself wavering as he pressed her for an answer.

She had no intention of ever becoming their child. Fredericks Berwick was her only father, and Vale Floria was her sole mother.

But if she stayed, maybe she could figure out where those accursed statues were coming from when Phoebe and Ebel couldn't.

The Werewolf Brotherhood... If I could only infiltrate it...

"Will you give me time to think about becoming your child?" Rock requested, masking her true intentions to uncover whatever information she could. "I still don't know anything about either of you. I don't even know how I should behave in your presence."

"I'm delighted just to hear you're willing to think about it." Real happiness showed in both his words and his softening expression. He took another sip of water and placed a hand on his chest in relief. "I really am glad. I'd be too ashamed to see Laretta if you continued to be stubborn."

"I'd love to speak more with my aunt."

That part was true. Granted, she had self-serving reasons for wanting to talk.

"Wonderful. I'll set up a meeting between you later. Laretta will be thrilled."

Placido gave the okay, so Rock plastered an awkward smile on her face.

And then she finally reached for the food on the table. She drank the water, ate the bread, and sipped her soup. She had no appetite but had to choke down the food no matter what.

She couldn't spy on an empty stomach, after all.

"Is it good? I sure hope it suits your tastes."

Placido's golden eyes brimmed with unadulterated affection as he watched Rock eat.



AFTER breakfast, Placido recommended Rock take a hot bath.

"There's a particular outfit I'd love for you to wear. Feel free to wash up before getting changed."

Just like that, Rock was led out of the room by Alice and shown to Alexis Manor's bathroom. Alice didn't leave the room, even after she'd finished showing her the way.

Noticing Rock's reluctance to undress in front of her, the maid broke the awkward silence first.

"I have been ordered to assist you."

"I-I don't need any help! I can dress and bathe myself, thank you!" Rock frantically explained, but Alice looked like she didn't believe a word of it.

"I've been told you spent most of your days living in a rural village, Young Miss. Pardon my rudeness, but I thought you might not know your way around a bar of soap..."

"I know how to do *that* much! I'll be fine, thank you," Rock refused her offer, resenting the maid's jab.

Alice also seemed less than pleased to deal with the sudden arrival of her new "Young Miss." She grudgingly accepted Rock's request and quietly left the changing room.

"Make sure to not only wash your whole body but also behind your ears."

Rock simmered with anger over the maid's last comment that was more appropriate for a young child than a full-grown, adult woman.

The bathroom was magnificently constructed using two rooms. A smaller room equipped with an imperial-capital-style steam bath was next to the room with a claw-footed bathtub filled with hot water. Owning a private steam bath was a surefire way to show one's wealth.

In the capital, steam baths received tremendous support and business from citizens from all walks of life, and even the slums, where most people lived day by day, had public bathhouses. Justia's bakery's second story served as one such place, and it was said to be a fantastic facility where you could enjoy the smell of freshly baked bread from the water heated by the ovens downstairs.

Rock and Phoebe were envious every time they saw customers enjoying a good meal after their baths. They were envious because public bathhouses were segregated by gender, and there naturally weren't any for "Ladies Dressed as Gentlemen" or "Gentlemen Dressed as Ladies."

This was why Phoebe lived on the inconvenient fifth floor, his apartment's top

floor, because it came equipped with its own bathroom. Meanwhile, Rock's apartment had no bath, so she borrowed Phoebe's or washed up using the washbasin.

How *would* she react now that she was granted access to a bathroom with its own private, luxury steam bath?

"What the heck?! It's so hot!"

She tried sitting in the steam bath but lasted less than five minutes in the high humidity before fleeing the room.

Rock finished bathing in the normal bathtub without ever truly comprehending why the steam baths were so popular. She cleaned every crevice of her body using the soap the right way, of course.

Once she exited the bathroom, she saw an unfamiliar dress left out next to her clothes.

Made of dull green, shiny silk fabric, it retained an old-fashioned design with its crochet collar, puffy bell sleeves, and long, dragging hem. It was as outdated as the dress Rock had borrowed from Phoebe yesterday.

Being a tailor didn't make the dress any easier to put on alone, so Rock asked Alice to come in from where she waited outside the room to help her.

"It suits you," Alice said in a deadpan voice as she tied the sash in a bow.

Rock wasn't going to dignify that with a response and instead glared at herself in the changing room mirror.

It wasn't just the design, but the dress itself seemed just as old. While it'd been stored well, there was no hiding the deteriorating silk fabric. The green fabric should've originally been a more vibrant shade.

It didn't seem like a dress that was custom-made for Rock, but then who did it belong to?

"I will wash your other clothes for you."

Alice pointed to the clothes Rock had changed out of for her bath.

"I'll do it myself, thank you," Rock quickly refused.

“But—”

“It will be fine. I’m good at taking care of clothes.”

Rock managed to return to her room with her clothes after stubbornly refusing the maid. This was the dress Phoebe had lent her.

I’ll absolutely bring it home and return it with my own hands, Rock silently vowed.



ONCE she finished getting ready, Rock was told to go to the living room where Lord and Lady Alexis were waiting.

“May I come in?”

Lauretta jumped to her feet from the chaise lounge when Rock bowed in the doorway.

“Oh my...!”

All the blood drained from her face as she covered her mouth with both hands.

Placido immediately rose and put a supportive arm around his wife’s shoulders.

“Lauretta, get a hold of yourself, dear.”

“I’ll try, but...but I was taken by surprise. She looks just like Valencia!”

Rock didn’t know how to react when her mother’s name came into the conversation.

“The dress you are wearing was tailored by Her Ladyship’s younger sister,” Danilo helpfully added. He was also in the room waiting to serve them.

“What...?”

Rock was also rendered speechless.

I can’t believe I’ve not only come across something of Mother’s but that I also put it on without realizing it... But now that I know, the workmanship is similar to my own.

Her mother had taught her how to make pleated sleeves and how to crochet patterns.

Lauretta let out a grieved sigh while Rock was taken by the dress.

“Valencia loved to sew ever since she was a little girl. I still remember her confiding in me that she’d rather become a tailor than take over the family headship.”

Lauretta began speaking of Vale’s childhood, which Rock knew little about.

“But our father—your grandfather, he’s no longer with us—had many enemies. His brothers were after our family title, so he forced us to compete, insisting we had to excel in every way to succeed him.”

Her expression was dark as if she was sick to her stomach just talking about the past. Placido firmly held her hand.

“I thought Valencia had betrayed me when she left with that man.”

Placido shot his wife a warning look when the vitriol entered her voice. He was probably worried the topic and bitterness there would upset Rock.

Lauretta nodded, seeming to understand she was entering rocky territory.

“But I am positive that sweet girl...just didn’t want to *fight* anymore. That’s what I believe now.”

Rock sensed this woman, who looked like a more worn-out version of her mother, had felt the same way as Vale deep down. It must’ve been the height of misery being forced by their parents to viciously compete for approval.

“Besides, Valencia left me so many things. Dresses, memories, and *you*.” Lauretta raised her head. She smiled as she looked at Rock, a sort of desperation in her eyes. “Don’t you want to see the dresses Valencia left me? You can wear them as much as you want.”

Rock was too dismayed to respond.

Every detail that Lauretta shared about her mother made her time in this house feel so real, it frightened Rock.

To Rock, her mother was a poor woman who ran a tailor shop in a rural

mountain village. But there was another side to her mother that only existed here. She was saddened to get a glimpse of her mother's childhood, which seemed less than happy.

Lauretta probably felt the same way about the stories only Rock knew about Vale.

Sensing it was making Rock upset, Lauretta ceased to speak of her younger sister for the time being.

"This is your home now. Spend your time here in whatever manner pleases you."

That wasn't just a kindly put, empty offer—they actually allowed Rock to freely roam the mansion after that. They didn't prevent her from entering any of the rooms.

Only *leaving* the house was frowned upon.

"It's not that we don't trust you, but could you please refrain from any outings until my wife is in a better place mentally?" Placido gently refused Rock when she asked to see the garden. "Lauretta will break down for real if she loses you."

Is that really something a kidnapper should ask his kidnapped daughter? Rock wryly thought. But she wasn't going to disobey his orders. Not because he'd broken her or because she'd given up hope, but to achieve her objective.

"I will behave as you've requested until Auntie feels better," Rock said with a fake, daughterly smile.

"Thank you," Placido responded, looking genuinely relieved. "But I sure hope you will call her 'Mother' someday."

She'd never give in to that request, but she intended to curry as much favor with her aunt and uncle as she could without compromising herself.

Rock was a businesswoman. She'd flatter a customer as much as she had to if she knew it'd land a sale.

What she'd obtain this time was not money but the information Ebel and Phoebe desperately sought. That information should have more value than

money to them all.



ROCK spent the next two days at Alexis Manor.

The emotional distance between her and her aunt and uncle didn't shrink visibly, but she'd go with Danilo into the garden to pick flowers for her aunt and spend time drinking tea with her, which made her look like an obedient daughter on the outside. Laretta was delighted by her niece's attention, and this, in turn, reassured Placido.

Meanwhile, Rock was no closer to obtaining the information she sought.

Since she'd decided to save directly questioning the lord and lady for last, she started by prodding the servants, Danilo, and Alice first. Unfortunately, Danilo's guilty conscience seemed to make him flee every time he saw her, and all the maids, especially Alice, gave her a wide berth. She couldn't blame them for being suspicious of some country girl brought in from God knows where and who lacked basic etiquette lessons.

Searching every nook and cranny of the mansion didn't turn up anything of note either. Her impatience grew when she couldn't find the werewolf statue or any items that could be connected to the Werewolf Brotherhood.

Rock constantly looked out the windows for those two days.

Maybe someone has come for me? She'd looked hoping to see the people she loved the most there to rescue her.

Sadly, her desired visitors never came, and only merchants frequented Alexis Manor during that time.

Rock frantically tried to keep her hopes up and her thoughts positive.

There was no way Ebel and Phoebe would abandon her. If anything, they were both the type to sacrifice whatever they had to in order to rescue her. So there must've been a good reason why they didn't show up right away.

In fact, there was an interesting article written up in the newspaper that'd been thrown into the wastebasket the day after Rock was kidnapped.

The article was about an accident that caused a carriage to topple on the

main street running through the aristocrat district. It clearly indicated the carriage belonged to Count Mateus and reported that the coachman sustained minor injuries while the single passenger was unharmed. The accident report said it was caused by the bridle disconnecting from the horse's bit—obviously, that wasn't what'd really happened.

Ebel and Phoebe couldn't publicly announce the carriage was attacked by a werewolf either. Placido was likely counting on that when he attacked. Still, Rock hadn't given up hope.

I'm not alone.

She never stopped believing that.



CHANGE came the third morning Rock woke up in Alexis Manor.

She was yawning in the coral pink bedroom she still hadn't gotten used to when there was a dainty knock at the door.

"Roxy? Are you awake?" Lauretta asked through the door.

Rock quickly combed out her bedhead and slipped a robe over her nightgown before answering.

"Come in, Auntie."

Lauretta was accompanied by Alice, who was holding two brand new dresses, which Lauretta made her hold up high so Rock could see their splendor.

"We have guests today. Choose the dress you like best and get ready to go downstairs."

Her options were an elegant, dark-green velvet dress or a glossy strawberry pink sateen dress. Judging by the exquisite quality of the fabrics, their guest was likely of higher rank.

"I'm supposed to meet these guests?" Rock cautiously inquired.

"Yes," Lauretta said, nodding. "But don't worry, dear. One of our guests is a young lady near your age."

"But—"

“It will be all right. She’s a very well-behaved and kind young lady,” Laretta said in soothing tones, as if trying to encourage her teenage daughter to make new friends. “You need friends too. I’m sure it will take you a while to get used to life here, so you need someone you can relax around.”

Her expression was so caring, it threw Rock for a loop.

Besides, Rock was a commoner girl who’d spent her life living in a poor village and the slums. Relaxing was the last thing she’d be able to do in the presence of snobbish nobility. She was well aware that Ebel was the exception that proved the rule.

“Who might this guest be?” Rock asked, already dreading the day ahead.

“Someone who you are already acquainted with,” Laretta said with a mischievous smile.

“Really?”

“Yes. It’s Duke Linus’s daughter, Lady Michaela Linus.”

At that moment, Rock experienced every kind of emotion:

Surprise over seeing an acquaintance in her situation.

Fear of Laretta, who knew Michaela was her friend.

Hope that Ebel might have sent her here.

And also suspicion that Laretta was letting them meet like this.

As Rock struggled to conceal the bilge of emotions, Laretta giggled behind her hand.

“I see, so you do know her. We had learned of your whereabouts from her, you see.”

From what Rock had heard, the Alexises learned of her existence from Michaela’s birthday party. So it made sense they’d ask the Linus family about her.

“I heard you were with Count Mateus when you met Lady Michaela,” Laretta continued in a surprisingly innocent voice. “Lady Michaela is His Excellency’s former fiancée. She said they barely see each other anymore now that they’re

no longer engaged, so she had no way to find you, but when I told her we found you ourselves, she said she'd love to see you again!"

That's a lie.

Michaela and Guido still spent a lot of time with Ebel, and Michaela knew exactly who and where Rock was after her party.

The duke's daughter was willing to pull the wool over the Alexises' eyes just to make contact with Rock.

"I would love to see her again myself," Rock responded mildly, keeping the emotions that threatened to cause her to tremble in check.

Then she chose the dark-green dress and waited for Michaela Linus to arrive.

It wasn't long before a familiar carriage rolled up outside the window. The carriage slowed to a stop as it entered Alexis Manor's courtyard, and the door opened from the inside.

The familiar faces almost made Rock nostalgic as she watched. A tall man with black hair was the first to step down—Guido Linus. He extended his hand inside the carriage, and a white-gloved hand reached out and took it.

Exiting the carriage with the help of her older brother, Michaela stared up at Alexis Manor as if searching for something. Following his sister's lead, Guido's gold eyes also scanned the windows.

Rock was about to wave to them when—

"Young Miss, your guests have arrived."

Danilo had come to get her, so she couldn't wave them down.

But she hadn't given up hope.

She impatiently waited for the coming reunion.



ROCK went to the foyer to welcome her guests with Lord and Lady Alexis.

The Linus siblings entered through the door Danilo held open. They immediately noticed Rock. Guido flattened his lips in a straight line and Michaela's eyes widened.

But their shock lasted for less than a second before they both shifted their gazes to the lord and lady of the house.

“Thank you very much for inviting us into your lovely home.”

Guido swept his tall body into a dashing bow and greeted them with what appeared to be a genial expression on the surface.

Lauretta and Placido both bowed back.

“We are honored by your visit, Lord Linus,” Placido said, placing his hand on Rock’s back like a father would. “Thanks to you, we were able to welcome our daughter back into the fold. Her name is Roxy.”

“Oh, *you’re* the lady from my party...!” Michaela cried out with pretend surprise.

“Lord Alexis has been searching for you for a long time,” Guido said in a velvety soft voice Rock never imagined him capable of. “While I regret not being of assistance in your discovery, I am terribly happy to see you safe.”

And then he smiled at her with his stern face.



Although Rock knew he was acting, she couldn't help feeling uncomfortable being on the receiving end of Guido's smile. That being said, one wrong move here could ruin everything. She silently smiled back at him and hoped the others would just assume she didn't know how to act around a future duke.

"It isn't much, but we've prepared tea and snacks for you," Laretta said in tones befitting the lady of the house. "Please enjoy them while I tell you about my daughter."

"Gladly." Guido was about to follow them down the hall when Michaela tugged on his sleeve.

"Brother, must I join you for tea too?" she asked in a soft yet deliberately loud enough voice for all to hear.

Guido frowned on cue.

"Of course you do. You were invited as a guest too, weren't you?"

"But I get *ever* so bored listening to stuffy adult talk." Michaela pouted. "Besides, I have a gift for Lady Roxy. It's not appropriate to bring this little one to tea, is it?"

She held up the bird cage she had been carrying. A white dove quietly sat on its perch inside.

"Oh, might this be a dove?"

Laretta crouched in front of Michaela and peered at the bird inside the cage.

"Yes, my brother breeds them," Michaela answered with angelic innocence. "This gift is proof of my newfound friendship with Lady Roxy!"

Her tone sounded much younger than the Michaela Rock knew. Laretta didn't seem to notice she was acting.

She looked over at Rock and said, "In that case, please show Lady Michaela to your room, Roxy. The rest of us adults will be conversing in the parlor."

"...Yes, Auntie."

Rock gave a quick but polite response to prevent her from catching on to her internal excitement. Then she hurried with Michaela to her bedroom.

The first thing Michaela did when Rock led her into the coral pink room was rest her hand on her chest with relief. As soon as she ascertained no one else was around, her expression shifted from cherubic to serious.

“I am so glad to see you safe, Roxy Floria,” she whispered in Rock’s ear.

She had used Rock’s true name—the one she took from her mother. As soon as she heard those two words, she relaxed, and tears spilled from her eyes.

“Ah...”

She thought she was being brave all this time, but maybe she was just enduring everything to get through the moment. Rock had been granted good food and a certain level of freedom within Alexis Manor, but spending time in her captor’s strange home definitely wore on her nerves. She’d also noticed how haggard her face was starting to look every time she saw herself in the mirror.

Rock was glad from the bottom of her heart to know Michaela had come to help her.

“You mustn’t cry. The others will catch on.”

Tears misted Michaela’s eyes too, even though she was trying to console Rock. She gently wiped away Rock’s tears with her palm. Then she pulled out a slate and pencil from her little bag.

She used the pencil to write on the slate first.

(Let’s write down the things we don’t want heard.)

Rock nodded when she read that.

Michaela smiled and enthusiastically raised her voice, “Oh, I’m ever so happy! I didn’t know *what* to do if you didn’t like my present!”

This was her way of telling Rock to continue the conversation in case anyone was spying on them. Catching on, Rock responded in kind, her face damp with tears.

“You needn’t worry about that. I am very happy!”

She accepted the slate pencil from Michaela and wrote down her true

feelings.

(I'm doing well enough, as you can see. Lord and Lady Alexis are doting on me as if I were their own child. I'm fairly sure they won't try to physically harm me.)

Michaela's expression softened as she read that.

"I'm truly relieved to hear that... It's what worried me the most."

"Thank you for worrying about me, Lady Michaela," Rock said aloud, earning a giggle from Michaela, who had loosened up now that she knew Rock wasn't being physically abused.

"Say, may I call you Roxy?"

"Yes, please do."

"Then you must call me Michaela as well."

"What? I couldn't..."

Rock was flustered by her request.

She was speaking to a powerful duke's daughter, while she herself was a tailor from the slums who'd been kidnapped by a noble family.

But Michaela plucked the pencil from her hand and mercilessly wrote:

(You can't when you call Ebel by his first name, without any title?)

The heat rushed to Rock's cheeks when she saw his name.

Perhaps Michaela was teasing her. This wasn't the time for joking, but Rock still found herself smiling.

"Please don't tease me."

"...You finally smiled, Roxy," Michaela whispered, the relief apparent in her voice. She squeezed Rock's hand when she returned the pencil and flashed her an adorable smile. "But I truly *do* want you to call me that. Aren't we friends now?"

Her smile felt incredibly reliable and reassuring.

"We are, Michaela."

That was why Rock spoke her name like she would an old friend's.

After that, the girls giggled and chatted like friends would, all while passing the slate back and forth, writing and erasing their more serious conversation.

“This dove here is a present for you,” Michaela said in a cheery voice. “Give it a name.”

“It’s so hard to come up with a good name...” Rock groaned.

“You struggle coming up with names too? You sound just like my brother.”

“Lord Linus is the same way?”

“Oh, yes. If something is white, he’ll call it ‘Whitey,’ and if it’s black, he’ll call it ‘Blacky!’”

“Haha! I was just about to call the dove ‘Whitey’ too!”

(Is my father all right?)

Rock wrote on the slate and handed it to Michaela.

(He’s in good health. He didn’t get a single scrape from the accident. Brother and I were astonished to learn your shop assistant was your father, but Ebel seemed quite comfortable with it.)

(Then Father is with Ebel right now?)

(He is. Actually, both he and Ebel are extremely close by.)

Rock instinctively looked out the window. Unfortunately, all she could see from inside the room was the balcony rail and the midday sky.

But Father and Ebel came for me.

Just knowing that warmed her heart, and she had to fight back another round of tears.

(They’ll move into position if we give the signal. They came to save you.)

Michaela handed the slate over as she gave Rock a reassuring smile.

I knew it! They came to rescue me. And not just them. Even Michaela and Guido have come to my aid.

Rock closed her eyes at the overwhelming joy she felt—she knew this wasn’t the time for rejoicing.

(I'm delighted you all came to help, but it's dangerous. Placido Alexis is a werewolf.)

Michaela's beautiful brows knitted in a frown when she read Rock's warning. She might have already guessed that when she met Placido.

(He has the same gold eyes as Ebel and Brother.)

(He also became a werewolf using one of those cursed statues.)

(There are even more of those statues out there?)

(I didn't see it for myself, but there's definitely more than the ones we destroyed. He's also in communication with the Werewolf Brotherhood.)

Michaela gasped. Pure hatred and anger flashed across her lovely young face.

"No...!"

She'd every right to be furious. Both her beloved older brother and her childhood friend and ex-fiancé had their lives derailed by the werewolf curse.

And that curse came by way of the Werewolf Brotherhood.

"Use this, Michaela."

Rock placed the pencil in Michaela's trembling hand.

Michaela stopped herself from saying more and furiously scribbled her feelings down on the slate.

(I didn't think they still existed!)

(I don't know if they're the exact same organization. But Lord and Lady Alexis relied on them and received power from the werewolf statue to grant their deepest desires.)

(That being your kidnapping???)

(Sadly, yes. Lord Alexis did it to heal his wife's broken heart.)

Rock hesitated to write what she had in mind next.

She wanted nothing more than to leave her gilded cage. To ask for help. How wonderful it would be if just one word to Michaela would have her back in her father's warm embrace and in Ebel's arms.

But if she left, she'd be letting go of a chance to uncover the truth.

Mustering all her courage, she wrote:

(I'm so grateful you came for me. But I want to stay here a little longer to see what I can find out about the Werewolf Brotherhood.)

Rock handed Michaela the pencil.

Michaela's eyes wavered and she hesitated to write anything for a long moment. But then she made up her mind like Rock and wrote her reply.

(Ebel would've never allowed you to do that. He'll probably try to whisk you away from here no matter the personal cost because he doesn't want you to suffer more than you already have. But—)

Michaela's pencil stopped there, her expression distorting with anguish. She finally pushed through it to write:

(But I want to know the truth. I want to sever the curse that afflicts Brother and Ebel at its root. Those are my true feelings on the matter. I know this is cruel to ask of you, but you are our only hope.)

"That's not true, Michaela," Rock reassured aloud, forcing a smile as she took the pencil back.

(I also want to know the truth. As long as those statues exist, there'll be no end to people like Lord Alexis, who will give up everything in the pursuit of power. This is an opportune moment. Please tell Ebel and my Father to come rescue me after I've found some information we can use.)

"Roxy, you..." Michaela's voice quivered.

Tears threatened to spill from her eyes this time, so Rock silently placed her hands on her cheeks. Understanding she was nearly about to do the same thing she'd warned Rock about, she blinked away the tears.

"I'm sorry. I'm all right."

Then she glanced over at the dove she'd brought as a "gift."

(That dove will fly straight back to our house once you let it loose.)

(So, I should release it when I want help?)

(Exactly. But please remember it will only work once.)

(In that case, I'll let it free as soon as I have something we can work with.)

(When you do, we'll use all our power to rescue you.)

Michaela marked that promise by looking into Rock's eyes.

Rock could sense her guilt from her gaze that seemed to both plead with her to do this and beg her for forgiveness. The thing was, Rock was choosing to stay behind of her own volition. There was no need for Michaela to feel guilty.

"I've made a very good friend today," Rock said, hoping her voice would convey how she felt. "I hope we continue to have a great friendship going ahead too, Michaela."

"Roxy... So do I," Michaela said with a firm nod. Then she picked the pencil back up and scribbled on the slate, her expression warping with the pain she was trying to keep at bay.

(Do you remember what happened before my brother was cursed?)

Rock blinked in confusion over what she was getting at with that question. Michaela continued to write.

(Brother was acting strange right before it happened. I don't know what possessed him, but he became obsessed with Ebel and fascinated by werewolves. But what's even stranger is that after he was cursed and came back to his senses, he said he could only vaguely recall his behavior beforehand and that he doesn't know what got into him.)

Rock got the chills as she read what Michaela wrote.

Michaela's expression was equally grim.

(Do you suppose the same thing might be happening to Lord Alexis? Like, what if those statues not only turn people into werewolves but also amplify their desires, making them uncontrollable?)

Her theory fit.

Placido deeply loved Laretta and was trying to bring her out of her depression. But kidnapping his niece to make that happen seemed too

shortsighted and reckless for his personality. That night almost seemed a lie with how good of a husband and lord he was at home.

What if that duality was also brought on by the curse?

What if he was also going crazy like Guido had?

Or what if the same was happening to Lairetta?

It must be stopped. The chain of misery being brought about by the curse must be broken.

Rock's resolve was strengthened.

Writing took much longer than talking did.

Rock still had a mountain of questions for Michaela. She wanted to know how her father was faring at Mateus Manor, how Iniel's recovery was going, and how Ebel was handling everything—but there was a knock at the door before she could ask.

Both girls froze for a fleeting moment before Michaela tucked the slate and pencil into her bag.

"Come in," Rock said only after she made sure the slate was out of sight.

The door opened and Guido stepped in after being escorted there by Danilo.

"It's time to go, Michaela. It's rude to stay too long."

"Aww, all right, Brother."

Michaela reluctantly stood up.

Rock also rose to see them off, earning an approving hum from Guido when he saw her full figure clad in the pretty deep-green dress.

"Very nice..."

He looked impressed.

When she thought about it, this was the second time Guido was seeing her in a dress. And he was probably too enraged the first time to pay much attention, so it wasn't strange for him to be surprised this time.

"Brother, isn't it *rude* for you to stare so hard?" Michaela laughed at her

brother. “Roxy’s future husband wouldn’t approve. I can hear him now: ‘To think you would become smitten by my bride!’”

“I’m *not* smitten,” Guido promptly objected before boasting, “Besides, you can’t find a more beautiful woman in this world than my sister. Lady Roxy isn’t half bad, but nowhere near on par with Micha—”

“OH, BROTHER!” Michaela fumed, cutting him off, her face redder than a tomato.

It appeared the Linuses were still the world’s closest siblings.

Thanks to them, Rock could truly laugh from the heart for the first time in days.



ROCK saw Guido and Michaela off in the foyer where she’d welcomed them. Lord and Lady Alexis were watching them, so they couldn’t say anything suspicious in parting.

“I had a wonderful time. Let’s meet again soon, Roxy.”

Rock looked right into Michaela’s smiling eyes and nodded.

“Yes, it’s a promise.”

Michaela curtsied after hearing Rock’s reply and then left the manor accompanied by her brother.

Rock was struck by the desire to chase after them as she watched them leave the house. But Danilo closed the door behind them before she could act on it, shutting off Rock’s connection to the outside world once again.

Michaela had said Ebel and Phoebe were close by. So Rock hoped she could at least step outside to show them she was doing well, but she wasn’t even allowed that freedom. Suffocating sadness filled her, but she closed her eyes and blocked it out.

“Come, dear. It’s time to go back to your room. Show me the gift you received from Lady Michaela,” Lauretta said with a big smile.

“Yes, Auntie,” Rock responded. Then she suddenly noticed a loose thread on

her sleeve. “Weird...?”

The cuffs were shamefully frayed, which was odd, considering it looked brand new when Laretta had gifted it to her that morning.

“What’s the matter, Roxy?” Laretta asked.

“My dress cuffs are frayed,” Rock answered honestly.

“You’re right, dear. This was supposed to be a brand new dress I had tailored just for you, though.”

“At least I can still repair it.”

Rock always carried a sewing kit on her, so she’d never miss a chance to make some coin. She’d had it with her when she visited the mausoleum with Ebel too.

“I have a sewing kit in my room, so I can repair it now,” she said.

“You can do that too?” Laretta’s eyes widened with surprise.

“Yes, Mother taught me.”

“I see...” she uttered in a low voice, then fell into deep thought.

Placido pensively walked past Laretta as she seemed rooted to the ground.

“Say, is it all right if I watch you mend it?” Laretta eventually asked after what felt like a long pause.

Rock thought it was an odd request, but she’d no reason to turn her down.

She returned to the coral pink bedroom with Laretta and mended the dress’s cuffs under the watchful eye of her new dove friend. All she had to do was take off the loose thread and resew it, which was a thousand times easier than fixing the fray.

Even so, Laretta was beyond impressed by it.

“You’re good... You have such skill with your hands, I wouldn’t be afraid to call what you’re doing art.”

Her eyes twinkled with childish delight as she sat next to Rock, watching her hands work. She was like a child being shown a flashy magic trick.

From Rock’s perspective, this skill was how she made her living, and she felt a

giddy kind of embarrassment when it was praised. It wasn't a bad feeling, being complimented.

In the coral pink room illuminated by the setting sun, Rock mended the dress sitting side by side with her aunt. There was something strangely comforting about the way their shadows seemed snuggled up together on the floor. It almost reminded her of when her mother taught her how to sew as a child.

"Something like this happened before..." Lauretta seemed to be reminded of the past as well. She slowly began recounting the incident. "Valencia mended my sleeve after it caught on something and tore. She said, 'I can handle something this simple, Sister.'"

There was something gutting about realizing those were once her mother's words. Her aunt seemed to truly know a side of her mother she didn't.

"When it came to sewing, her hands really did work magic. She seemed happiest when she had a needle and thread in hand..."

Loneliness crept into Lauretta's expression as she dug through her memories—the way everyone gets a little sad when they reminisce about the past.

She must've cherished and missed those long-gone days that she could never return to. Regardless of their fighting leading to their separate paths in life, there was once a point when they were close sisters. And there was no way to return to that time.

"I didn't know how sad it'd be to lose her back then," Lauretta muttered, her eyes locked on Rock. "My precious little sister did a wonderful job raising you."

Tears lightly misted her gray eyes. Her expression, which seemed so inhuman and cold the first day they met, had regained human warmth and emotion.

"...Thank you, Auntie."

Rock was uncomfortable because she was starting to feel guilty about deceiving her aunt by playing along with what she wanted.

Though she was doing it for the just cause of pinning down the location of the Werewolf Brotherhood, her aunt was sure to get her feelings hurt in the process. Rock's goal was to discover the truth and then return in one piece to

the slums. Laretta would surely suffer even more when she found out Rock wasn't planning to stay.

But Michaela seemed like she was onto something when she'd written: (*Like, what if those statues not only turn people into werewolves but also amplify their desires, making them uncontrollable?*)

If her theory was correct, then uncovering the truth would lead to saving Laretta and Placido.

They'd kidnapped their own niece to satisfy their desires. Even if they did it out of familial and marital love, they needed to be stopped now before it was too late.

If they were left to their own devices, they might very well commit another crime for their "family."

While Rock was busy solidifying her resolve, Laretta interrupted her thoughts.

"Oh, I know! There's actually another piece of clothing I have that's frayed and bothering me."

Apparently, she wanted Rock to mend some clothes for her.

"Would you like me to fix it?" Rock happily offered, her guilty conscience getting the better of her.

"Yes, I'd be delighted if you could." Laretta seemed thrilled until her bright smile soured a little. "To tell you the truth, both that item and your dress were made by the same tailor. I'm shocked they both frayed when they aren't that old yet."

Auntie must've been conned by a bad tailor, Rock thought.

Looking closely at the velvet dress, the sewing work was poorly done in more than one place. Although she'd fixed the cuffs, it was only a matter of time before other sections came undone. As a fellow tailor, Rock was disgusted and infuriated by the sloppy work.

Rock thought of her own shop while she followed Laretta to her dressing room.

She hadn't been back to her shop since going to Ebel's. Phoebe probably didn't have the time to go back and forth from Ebel's, so the shop was likely left closed with their away sign for the past few days.

Justia was probably going to start worrying about them soon. Lady Trilian might also be throwing a fit, thinking Rock was shirking paying rent. And then there was Nisha...

What would Nisha think when she realized the second tailor she knew had vanished without a trace too?

I hope she doesn't get too depressed. Rock couldn't help wishing for the other girl to stay strong.

"This is the room. Let me pull the piece out of the drawers."

Lauretta opened a chest of drawers once they arrived in her dressing room. Then she began merrily searching for the clothing she wanted to be fixed.

With nothing better to do, Rock randomly looked around. It was quite large for a room dedicated just to clothing—granted, only nobility could afford to waste a whole room for such things. Judging by all the dressers and shelves, her aunt probably owned more clothes than what Rock had in stock at her shop.

Lauretta finally found what she was looking for in the room that smelled of herbs used to keep bugs away.

"I found it. Roxy, would you mind taking a look?" She pulled the piece of clothing out of the drawers and held it up for Rock to see. "The embroidery on the back is coming undone. I thought I'd never be able to wear it again."

"I'll see what I can do."

Rock turned around with a smile—then froze.

Her aunt was holding up a blue robe.

The wool satin faille fabric had been dyed an eye-catching blue, and its back had an intricate design embroidered in gold thread. As Lauretta had said, the embroidery was frayed, but Rock could tell it was of the foxglove flower.

Rock had seen an order placed for a very similar robe rather recently.

The order recorded in Krister Gionet's ledger.

"...What's the matter, Roxy?"

Rock shuddered at Laretta's question. She hastily composed herself.

"N-Nothing. I was just taken by the stunning embroidery."

"It *is* rare to see such complex embroidery work, even if it is fraying."

Laretta gave a carefree response. At least she hadn't noticed how flustered Rock felt.

"Do you think you can fix it?"

"Yes, I can manage it."

The embroidery's quirks were exactly the same as the dress Rock was wearing. It was a really sloppy job, resulting from rushing to finish the end product and giving priority only to the appearance while cutting corners on stitching. As a fellow tailor, Rock could never forgive such shoddy workmanship.

But she'd never felt happier to see it in her life.

"Auntie?" Rock began, accepting the robe from Laretta. "Is it possible for me to meet the tailor who made this?"

"Why would you want to do that?"

That was the natural thing to ask.

But Rock couldn't let herself get caught now, so she made up the most plausible excuse she could.

"I'd love to speak to the person capable of such beautiful embroidery work. Learning from them would help me in my studies."

Rock wasn't sure she'd succeeded in putting much enthusiasm into her lie. At least Laretta seemed convinced by it.

"Well then, that works for us too. I've been thinking about taking you to worship service at the Brotherhood with me next time."

"Worship...service?"

"Yes. We wear these robes during worship," Laretta said, then added, "The

tailor works for the Brotherhood. You'll definitely see him if you come to church with us."

That must be Krister, right? What's he doing with the Werewolf Brotherhood? Was he kidnapped like me? Or...

But Rock had no reason to hesitate.

"I'm looking forward to it. When's the next service?" Rock asked as cheerfully as she could manage.

Lauretta seemed delighted to see her niece take an interest in her religion. "During the next Market Day," she told her.

Market Day was a weekly holiday meant to encourage people to take time off work and shop in the markets.

The concept wasn't particularly appreciated or followed in the slums, but it seemed to have already taken root in the imperial capital, and the area around the shopping district was especially busy on that day. Since it was a day when peddlers and people from all classes walked the streets in large numbers, it was also an ample opportunity for thieves to slip in from the slums to pick pockets or commit other crimes.

It made sense for the Brotherhood to have their worship service then.



IT was the sunny, windless day before Market Day.

Rock slipped away from Lord and Lady Alexis's watchful eyes and released the white dove from her bedroom balcony.

"Cute little bird, please let everyone know."

A thinly folded letter was securely strapped to the rock dove's leg as it took flight. The letter explained Rock would be accompanying her aunt and uncle to their next Werewolf Brotherhood worship service on Market Day and that she believed Krister might be there.

Rock had no way of knowing if the dove successfully returned home.

Either way, Market Day came, and Lord and Lady Alexis departed their manor

by carriage, with Rock in tow, after breakfast.

Their carriage soon left the aristocrat district and leisurely ran through the busy shopping district.

Rock frequently glanced out the window and searched for Ebel and Phoebe. But there were no blatant signs of them pursuing the carriage as it proceeded out of the imperial capital.

“You needn’t worry. We aren’t going that far,” Placido said, assuming Rock’s fixation with the window was out of fear of leaving the capital. “We’ll be back in time for dinner. It’s right outside the capital.”

No sooner did he say that than the carriage stopped on a small hill overlooking the city.

There was a double-leaf stone door hidden behind tall grass in the shadow of the hill. The door, which looked large enough for the carriage to pass through, appeared too old to have been built recently.

The imperial capital was surrounded by ancient ruins that’d been abandoned and forgotten. Most of them were little more than collapsed stone pillars wrapped in thick vines with fragments of their moss-covered foundation left intact, but a few of the buildings remained standing in their original form. During his mercenary days, Phoebe used to explore those ruins for antiques.

Phoebe often told Rock that bandits and other devious groups liked to turn those ruins into their secret bases, making exploring them even more dangerous than just avoiding traps.

This was her first time seeing one for herself, though.

Placido opened the doors just as Rock thought that this couldn’t be the place.

“The Brotherhood’s church is located here. Follow me.”

Beyond the heavy stone door, a set of stairs gently descended into the unknown.

The long stone staircase was intermittently illuminated by lantern light. Although it was an ancient ruin, the air wasn’t stagnant, likely because it had frequent foot traffic. The sweet scent of burning fragrant wood incense drifted

up from somewhere below.

The ruins seemed to have retained their original shape, and once Rock descended the final step, she saw the gate of an old cathedral supported by stone pillars. There was a large sanctuary beyond the gate decorated with elaborate wolf reliefs where people clad in blue robes sat on benches with their heads bowed.

“I’m going to go greet the bishop,” Placido said, dressed in the same blue robe.

Lauretta nodded. She was wearing the robe Rock had mended.

“I’ll show Roxy around the sanctuary.”

“Please do. I’ll meet up with you later.”

Husband and wife shared a loving look before Lauretta took Rock into a hallway beside the sanctuary.

The hallway led to several smaller rooms, leading Rock to believe it was some kind of residential area. The simple hearth showed traces of food being cooked recently, and there were shelves lined with pots and plates, giving it a more lifelike atmosphere than the sanctuary. Plain beds could be seen behind the cloth partitions, making it seem like people lived there.

After passing through several wooden doors that looked like they’d recently been installed, they finally arrived at one of the small rooms.

“Pardon me. Are you here, Mr. Tailor?” Lauretta called into the dimly lit room, and the man who’d been sitting on a chair in the corner looked up.

“Oh, Lady Alexis. Hello—”

The man was in the middle of giving a robotic greeting when he noticed Rock standing beside the lady. His cloudy eyes rounded. His sunken cheeks twitched, and his charcoal eyes wavered as if life had been breathed back into them.

“...It *can’t* be—”

Rock remained a step behind Lauretta and shook her head before he could finish speaking.

Please bear with it a little longer, she urged him with her eyes.

28-year-old male, slender, silver hair, charcoal-black eyes—he'd lost a lot of weight compared to his portrait in the missing person poster.

His silver hair had lost its luster and was a mess of split ends.

But Rock would never mistake the face of the man who was once her nuisance of a rival.

Today marked exactly one month since she'd last seen Krister Gionet and they were finally reunited.



Chapter 5: Wolves Form Packs

KRISTER'S room smelled faintly of mold.

The walls were made of rough limestone, and the cramped space was furnished with only two work tables and the chair he sat on. It was far too small for a tailor's workshop and too dark, lacking any windows to let in natural light.

But pincushions, measuring tape, scissors, and punch needles were scattered about. Several clothes were hanging on the back wall, further testifying that he was indeed working there.

"Mr. Tailor, this is our daughter," Lauretta introduced Rock to Krister. "Her name is Roxy. She's interested in sewing and seemed *very* taken by your embroidery."

"Roxy...?" Krister repeated that name in a hoarse, cracked voice.

Of course, he had no way of knowing. All of the slum dwellers, including him, believed the owner of Floria Clothes Shop was a young man called Rock Floria.

And today, Rock was wearing a blue dress with amber embroidery to match the robes her aunt and uncle wore. A gold, gem-lined hairclip decorated her wine-colored tresses. It'd be impossible to mistake her for anything other than a woman unless you knew otherwise.

That was probably why Krister looked so terribly distraught.

He gave Rock a wild-eyed stare, completely disregarding Lauretta in the process.

Rock silently scowled, stopping the flustered tailor from saying something that could get them both killed.

"Is something the matter, Mr. Tailor?" Lauretta asked, suspicion edging into her voice.

"N-No, nothing's wrong..." Krister responded as if he was coming up for air

after being held underwater, his eyes still anchored on Rock.

Lauretta turned to follow his gaze, so Rock hurriedly injected herself into the conversation.

“He must be *terribly* busy, Auntie. His work table is cluttered with projects.”

“Oh dear, I didn’t realize...” Lauretta held her hand up to her lips in dismay, then apologetically continued, “Shall we come back another time, Roxy?”

“No, I—”

“I can at least chat if you don’t mind me working at the same time,” Krister said faster than Rock could. He glanced at Rock before turning back to Lauretta and saying, “I am humbled she has taken an interest in my embroidery. I know it’s rude to converse while I’m working, but I would love to speak with your daughter.”

“Really? I don’t mind if it doesn’t bother you, but...”

Lauretta seemed reluctant.

Perhaps she didn’t feel comfortable leaving Rock alone at the church during her first visit. But Rock also needed Lauretta to leave if she was ever going to get anywhere with her investigation.

“I’ll come find you as soon as we are finished talking shop, Auntie. Please tell me where I can find you.”

“I... I guess I will join my husband in speaking with the bishop,” Lauretta said, then she bowed to Krister. “I’m sorry to impose on you when you’re busy, Mr. Tailor. Please speak with my daughter for a little while.”

And then she left the cramped room without suspecting a thing.

The two tailors remained silent in the muffled underground room until the footsteps retreated into the distance. Once they were sure she was out of earshot, Krister looked up at Rock and cautiously asked:

“You’re...Rock Floria, aren’t ya?”

“I am. Long time no see, Krister.”

When Rock confirmed her identity, Krister leaned toward her to get a better

look at her confounding appearance.

“Why’re ya dressed like a girl? Phoebe rub off on you?”

“*That’s* the first thing you want to ask?” Exasperated, Rock shrugged. “Spies need disguises, no?”

“That’s not all. Weren’t you just introduced as a noblewoman’s daughter? And not just any noblewoman, but *that* Lady Alexis!” Krister uttered her name as if it was the most terrifying one in the world.

That bothered Rock, but she decided to answer him first.

“Don’t worry about the small things. I’m more interested in your situation.”

“*My* situation...?”

“Why are you with the Werewolf Brotherhood? Tell me the truth.”

When Rock urged him to speak, terror filled Krister’s gaunt face. He lowered his voice to a barely audible whisper.

“I was kidnapped by the freakin’ cultists. They’re monsters, I tell ya! They just broke into my house in the middle of the night!”

His apartment definitely showed signs of a break-in. Phoebe said that if it was a kidnapping, it had to be a skilled group’s work. His guess seemed to be right on the money.

“Why were *you* kidnapped? You aren’t a werewolf, right?”

Krister’s eyes were the same charcoal-black that was listed on the missing person posters. He trembled like a tree in the middle of a tornado at the question.

“Don’t be ridiculous! Like hell I’d willingly become a damn werewolf!”

“Did they *tell* you to become one?”

“They told me they’d gladly grant me the power if I wanted it. But they only kidnapped me to work here.”

If they could offer the power that easily, then that meant someone in the Brotherhood had the ability to bestow the werewolf curse on others.

The same statue that turned Placido into a werewolf must still be somewhere in these ruins, she thought.

“They started off as ordinary customers.” Krister exhaled a shaky breath, as if recalling a traumatic memory. “I thought the money was too good to be true. But then they put in a huge order for thirty robes and were willing to pay for any expenses along the way. I jumped on the opportunity, and the customer was pretty nice at first, too.”

There’s always a catch when something sounds too good to be true.

Phoebe always stuck by that saying, but Krister didn’t. He stupidly accepted a job that smelled fishy.

“They couldn’t place that order in the capital. Blue robes are considered damned by that city’s churches, so no reputable tailor would touch that order with a thirty-foot pole. That’s why they came all the way out to the slums to find a tailor they could make disappear, if ya know what I mean. They settled on me, but it turns out they looked into you too.” Krister dropped his voice to an even more terrifying whisper, “They knew where you live.”

“What...?” Rock was speechless. Then she suddenly remembered the night she ran into Krister in front of her apartment. “Is *that* how you knew where I lived?”

“Yeah. They told me.”

“That’s *hella* creepy... And hey, shouldn’t that have freaked you out too?”

Shouldn’t there be a limit to how much caution and conscience someone’s willing to throw away in pursuit of riches?! Rock scowled, earning a bitter smile from him.

“You can say *that* again. I was a fool.” Sighing, he continued, “I got too full of myself. I deliberately delayed delivering the end product, hopin’ to milk ’em for all I could. I said crap like, ‘It’s taking longer than expected to get a hold of the fabric you wanted.’ That started to piss ’em off or somethin’, because the next thing I knew, I was trapped here, forced to do their bidding.”

“You reap what you sow.”

Krister seemed to have had that lesson burned into his very soul—he didn't object to her criticism.

"But they're still a hella crazy bunch, even without me screwing around. They broke my right leg the day they kidnapped me, saying it was to stop me from runnin' away."

"Your leg?"

Rock looked at Krister's leg with a start.

Maybe the reason he'd never got up from his chair to greet them was because he couldn't stand up. Was his right leg bandaged under his pants? It looked oddly bumpy and swollen around his knee.

"That's horrible... Can you walk?"

"I can't run, but I can manage if I drag the thing," Krister replied bitterly, hugging his shoulders to stop shaking. "But that's only where this nightmare began. Those bastards were the ones who broke my damn leg, but the second I said I'd work for 'em here, they suddenly started pitying me. They treated my injuries like they'd forgotten they were the damn monsters who caused them!!!"

Krister angrily shook his head, his shaking growing out of control.

"The bloody bastards are the nicest people in the world if you work for the Brotherhood. Like, *eerily* nice. It's like they've forgotten they ever kidnapped me. They seem to think I came here of my own will."

Rock sucked in a quiet breath.

His situation sounded eerily like hers. It was the same as how the Alexises doted on her like their own daughter, after they'd smashed her carriage apart and kidnapped her.

That was probably the curse's effect.

It made people's desires irresistible.

And once they had their desires fulfilled, they regained their original personalities and treated others with an unnatural level of kindness.

The werewolf curse is becoming more terrifying the more I learn about it, Rock lamented.

“You came to save me, didn’t you?” Krister asked, his eyes begging her for help.

“I’d love to say that’s the case, but I’ve got my hands full taking care of myself.”

Rock estimated she’d passed over a dozen cultists since entering the underground cathedral. She didn’t know how many were werewolves. There was at least one—her uncle.

Meanwhile, Rock lacked physical strength, and Krister could barely stand. Ebel and the others would come to their aid if her dove made it to them, but she’d no way of knowing if it had.

“Please! Help me! Get me outta this hellhole!” Krister pitifully cried out.

It’s not like she didn’t want to help him, but Rock didn’t have the strength to escape while supporting him.

“Don’t whine, Krister,” she rushed to placate him before he drew attention. “If everything goes right, help will come. And if it does, I promise to break you out too.”

“Only if it goes *right*? What happens if it goes wrong?” Krister asked, his voice trembling with fear of the answer.

“I’m trying not to think about it.”

I’m not alone.

That thought kept Rock going.

Of course, it was unfair to ask Krister to think the same way when he’d been isolated and helpless for so long.

“I can trust ya, can’t I...Rock Floria?”

Apprehension darkened his features, so Rock brought up the one thing she thought might lift his spirits.

“You don’t want Nisha seeing you look so scared, right?”

Mentioning her name had an immediate effect. Life returned to Krister's face, and his glassy eyes regained their former mirth.

"Nisha... You met her?"

"Yeah. She was looking for you. She coughed up a pretty penny to put up missing person posters all over the slums."

Nisha must've invested a lot of money in those posters. It would be a real shame if Krister didn't make it back to her alive.

"Don't waste her money. You'd better make it back alive, Krister."

Those were the most effective words for a fellow money-lover.

"Nothing worse than wastin' money! Thank you, Rock." Krister bowed his head and wiped under his eyes. "I thought she'd have moved on by now."

"You *know* she's not that shallow. I would've never cared about finding you if not for her," Rock snorted.

Krister frowned with unease. "I ain't givin' *you* Nisha."

"You'd better not even try. Nisha ain't gonna let ya go," Rock retorted, using her best slum accent.

Seeing him get his spunk back was a real relief.

Rock wanted nothing more than to help him escape his underground prison that very day, but when she turned around looking for something to help her make that happen, she saw someone who wasn't there before.

Placido Alexis was looming directly behind her.

He stood in the small room's doorway, less noticeable than invisible gases in the air. How long had he been there?

"U-Uncle..." Rock uttered in shock, and Krister let out a terrified yelp.

Placido was all smiles in the face of their sheer panic.

"Roxy, doesn't the tailor have a lot of work to do? You mustn't overstay your welcome," he said, his gold eyes narrowed on them in such a way that Rock couldn't discern the emotion behind them.

But his smile gave her the chills.

How much of their conversation had he overheard? She hoped it was none, but he was a werewolf. He might have heard everything—

“Th-Thank you for your time, Mr. Tailor,” Rock hastily said goodbye to Krister.

Krister said nothing in return, his eyes nailed on Placido, his expression frozen in fear.

Rock followed Placido out of the room.

Her uncle turned around to face her after they'd proceeded a little ways down the narrow hallway. “Are you...acquainted with that tailor?”

So he did overhear, Rock thought.

She glared at Placido to hide her terror.

“I see not even those of noble blood are above eavesdropping,” she quipped.

“Nothing is below me when it comes to my precious niece.”

Placido didn't take the bait. Instead, he grabbed Rock's wrist, as if to drive his point home.

“I want you to know this, Roxy: I treasure you like I treasure Laretta.”

His large hand tightened painfully around her wrist, sending the message that he could easily break her in two if he had to.

“But I won't allow even *you* to be the cause of Laretta's sorrow.”

“Uncle, y-you're hurting me,” Rock moaned, but Placido didn't let go.

“I *can't* let you go free for Laretta's sake. Do we have an understanding?”

The golden eyes looking down the bridge of his nose at her flared with insanity.

Rock had seen eyes just like that once before.

Those were the same eyes she'd come face to face with when Guido Linus had lured her to his mansion and trapped her in its storage room, while he was under the statue's influence.

Sensing the danger, Rock reluctantly played along.

“...I understand you perfectly.”

She uttered words she didn't mean, but she had to if she wanted to survive.

If nothing else, Placido seemed satisfied. He released Rock's wrist and then suddenly looked apologetic.

“I apologize for coming across so threatening. To me, both you and Lauretta are irreplaceable.”

“I'm sure...you feel that way.”

He probably wouldn't listen even if she told him that he was being driven to insanity *by* those feelings.

Rock couldn't help hoping there was some way to break the spell on him.

“Are you ready to go, Roxy?” Placido asked, urging her on with a fatherly smile, entirely unaware of her inner turmoil.

“Go where, Uncle?” she asked as she rubbed her aching wrist.

“To see the bishop,” he responded with the epitome of gentle calm. “He wants to meet you.”

Rock had thrown herself into the heart of her enemy's camp, hoping for this chance. And yet, she found herself trembling with fear, now that she'd gotten what she wanted.



ROCK was led by Placido through the ancient ruins.

Mazelike passages had been carved out of the limestone and branched out in different directions along the way, but Placido carried on his path without getting lost. Had he traveled this route so many times that he knew it like the back of his hand? Or did his werewolf senses guide him? Either way, being forced to follow him into this maze was enough to put Rock on high alert.

Eventually, a wooden double door appeared in front of them.

Placido pushed it open with both hands, and the heavy door groaned with the effort.

A sprawling open space with high ceilings appeared. It was the only section of

the ruins left like a natural cave, with several dozen small holes in the limestone ceiling. Narrow shafts of light spilled in through those holes, pouring down on the surroundings like a shimmering veil of silk. Fragrant wood incense was burning here too, and billows of smoke rose toward the ceiling, as if riding on the light.

But Rock's full attention was directed to something altogether different from that beautiful display.

Her eyes fixed on a large, old stone statue enshrined in the back of the cavernous room.

Many years—centuries, perhaps—must have passed since it was made. The chiseled shape and features carved into the limestone had rounded and become ambiguous over time.

But Rock recognized it. The statue looked just like the one she'd bought at Lady Trilian's shop. Like the one Guido Linus had gotten his hands on and cursed himself with.

The entire back wall had been carved out in the shape of that damned werewolf statue.

"This is..."

Placido wordlessly passed by Rock as she stared in terror at the wall. Her eyes tracked him as he walked toward the two people waiting in front of the life-size statue.

It was Laretta and someone Rock didn't know. The stranger was shorter and altogether smaller than Laretta and wore the same blue wool satin faille robe. Their face was hidden under a white-painted wooden mask, revealing only their eyes and lips.

"Oh, hello, darling. I see you brought Roxy with you." Laretta's voice sounded awfully chipper for the eerie atmosphere weighing over the whole room. "I was just speaking to the bishop about her."

She looked to the petite masked person when she said that.

"Go on, Roxy. Greet the bishop," Placido urged her.

“A-All right.”

Urge me all they want, but who in their right mind would want to speak to such a blatantly suspicious person?

Rock was wary, but Lord and Lady Alexis were watching her. She reluctantly stepped forward.

“How do you do? I’m Roxy,” she introduced herself, and the bishop slowly nodded.

“Roxy Alexis. I have already heard all about you.”

The bishop’s voice sounded so young that it took Rock by surprise. It had such an innocent tone, and the pitch was just at the level where it was impossible to tell if it was a boy or girl speaking.

“A young girl guided to your new family by the werewolf’s power. I pray that your path in life is always warm and filled with success,” the bishop said, faltering along the way, as if they were reading off a script.

It seemed only Rock was alarmed by that oddity. Both Placido and Laretta listened with tranquil, reverent expressions.

And the bishop even had the nerve to call her Roxy *Alexis*.

I don’t remember ever relying on the werewolf’s power to guide me to a new family I didn’t want.

Rock’s opinion on that matter remained uncompromised and defiant.

“Now then, Roxy, I will bestow the blessing upon you,” the tiny bishop said, pointing to the area in front of the statue. “Lay there.”

They had pointed to an altar that looked like a bed carved out of stone.

Rock thought it was an altar because werewolves had been carved into its base as well. It came up to her knees and was just long enough for a person to lie across it without issue.

Obviously, Rock had no intention of obeying.

“Why?” Rock asked, not hiding the wariness from her voice.

“Didn’t you hear me?” the bishop replied in dulcet tones. “It’s to bestow the

blessing upon you.”

“What *is* this blessing?” Rock asked her aunt and uncle since she didn’t think she’d get anywhere with the elusive bishop.

Unfortunately, it seemed they were just as confused. Laretta gave her husband a questioning look and Placido voiced his doubts.

“We didn’t hear anything about this either, Bishop.”

“And you wouldn’t have,” the bishop said with a guileless nod. “The moonlight delivered the oracle to this altar just last night. The oracle told me to offer the statue a drop of blood from the newcomer and to bestow the blessing upon them.”

The werewolf curse would be unleashed when the statue received blood.

Knowing that, Rock blanched.

Lord and Lady Alexis also gave each other baffled looks.

“Does that mean Roxy will gain the werewolf’s power...?”

“With all due respect, Bishop, our daughter is as delicate as a flower, as I’m sure you can see. I doubt she will be of use to the Brotherhood even if she receives the werewolf blessing.”

“Do not misunderstand the blessing,” the bishop replied with absolute composure in the face of Laretta’s confused frown and Placido’s objection. “It is not for the Brotherhood’s benefit but for *hers*.”

“You mean to say it is for Roxy’s own good?”

“Indeed. According to the oracle, this girl’s path in life is fraught with thorns. There is much she must fight and resist going ahead. The power of the werewolf is a blessing granted to overcome those obstacles.”

HOGWASH!

Rock resisted the urge to shout, but she couldn’t conceal her anger.

The bishop’s eyes gleamed through their mask as they took in the sight of her biting her lip.

“There’s nothing to fear, Roxy Alexis. You are about to obtain a *wonderful*

power! It's the power to crush every difficulty, obstacle, and enemy in your way, so you can fulfill your deepest wishes."

Everything about the bishop's voice, from its tone to its lilt, sounded terribly young. The way they spoke like a child clumsily reciting a poem from memory only ignited fear in Rock.

"Now...entrust yourself to the altar."

"Hell no!"

Rock shouted out loud this time, but her feet were swept off the ground before she could make a run for it. Placido had picked her up and placed her on top of the altar.

"Uncle?!"

Placido looked down at his terrified niece with a calming smile.

"You heard the bishop. Not many people can receive this blessing. Gladly accept it."

"What the hell are you saying?! I don't want this shit!"

"Hell? Shit?" the bishop quietly repeated her unladylike word choice, as if they found fault with it. But they quickly shook their head and ordered Placido and Laretta. "The ritual will be over quick. Both of you, please restrain your daughter."

"Stop! Lemme go!"

Rock swung her arms and thrashed like her life depended on it.

But Placido pinned down her hands, preventing her from leaving the altar.

"This is a miraculous power! It is the only blessing granted to weaklings abandoned by the gods."

The praying bishop pulled a slender dagger out of their robe pocket.

Rock became even more terrified when the needlelike tip gleamed in a shaft of sunlight.

"It's all right. It's just a little prick."

The level of kindness in Placido's soothing voice was downright eerie.

Rock wasn't just afraid because she had witnessed the werewolf curse before.

She had a terrible feeling she wouldn't be able to resist it right now.

She had an earnest wish buried deep within her—or rather, desires.

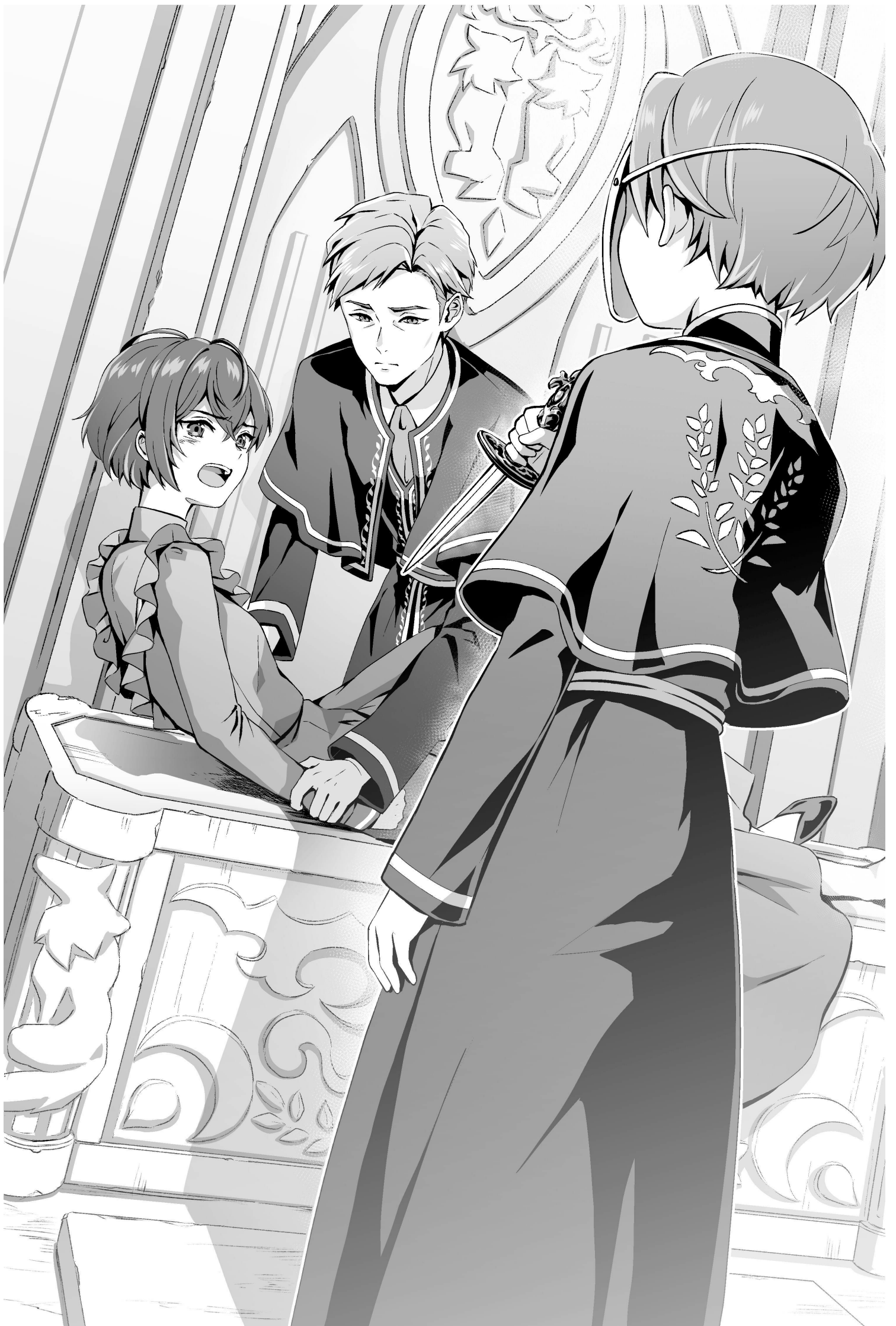
I want to go home. I want to reassure Father. I want to see Ebel.

I don't want to be here!

I don't want anything to do with something as terrifying as a curse. I wish I had the power to destroy every last thing connected to these statues that caused Ebel, Guido, and those around them to suffer so much.

If only I had the power to make it, so no one has to suffer again—

“Please! Don't do this! I'm begging you!”



Rock's plea devolved into screams.

She had a terrible, unshakeable feeling that if she were to receive the werewolf curse at this moment, she would lose herself forever.

She probably wouldn't be satisfied until she'd destroyed everything and everyone in these ruins.

"I don't need power! I absolutely don't want it!"

Placido loosened his grip when he heard her strangled cry.

"Roxy...?"

He blinked in a daze, as if he'd just awoken from a dream.

Lauretta's expression also changed, and she clung to the bishop, who had the dagger raised over Rock.

"Bishop, my daughter is terribly upset. Please let her go for today—"

"What has gotten into you two? There was an oracle. Oracles are absolute." The suspicious bishop shook Lauretta off.

Lauretta rushed over and placed herself between the bishop and Rock.

"Please stop! My daughter is so terrified!"

"What *happened* to you? Why would such devout believers stand in my way...?"

The bishop tilted their neck, as if they were staring at an enigma they couldn't understand.

Placido and Lauretta also seemed confused. They stiffened and exchanged perplexed looks

This was the time to escape.

With her arm restraints loosened, Rock sat up on the altar.

Just as she did, the double doors were thrown open with enough force to break them.

"Bishop!"

A man dressed in the cult's blue robes barreled into the room.

"What's the matter?" the bishop asked.

"We've got trouble!" the distraught man cried. "Werewolves! People who suddenly transformed into werewolves are rampaging in the sanctuary!"

"Werewolves?" the bishop repeated, emphasizing the plurality.

The man jerked his head up and down.

"Y-Yes. I saw at least two, both young men. They were praying in the sanctuary, when, without any warning, their clothes tore, and they became werewolves."

"Impossible... Only those who've received the blessing can become werewolves," the bishop muttered in their childish voice. "The people worshipping in the sanctuary haven't received the blessing yet. Are you certain you didn't see wrong?"

"I know what I saw!"

All the color had drained from the man's face. His knees were shaking so hard they were smacking together—a sure sign he'd seen something terrifying.

"They've lost their minds! Please do something!" he begged for assistance from the bishop, as if the child were his one and only hope not to be eaten.

But his nightmare was Rock's salvation.

Two young male werewolves the Brotherhood knows nothing about... They might just be...

Rock couldn't sit still when she thought of that possibility.

She slid off the altar and ran at full speed for the doors, shoving the bishop and man out of her way as she went.

"Outta my way!"

Rock might not have been the strongest person out there, but the trembling man and child bishop posed no obstacle to her. They easily tumbled to the ground, and Rock took that opening to bolt from the cavernous room.

"Roxy!" Placido called after her a moment later as he regained his senses.

“Don’t go, Roxy! It’s dangerous! Come back!”

Rock heard Laretta’s panicked plea as well, but she didn’t look back. She yanked up her dress so the hem wouldn’t get in the way and ran for her life in the direction of all the noise.

She didn’t know which way to go. But if she relied on the screams and commotion, she was sure to run into them.

I knew he’d come. I trusted he would absolutely rescue me. I’ve cried. I’ve suffered. Yet, I was able to endure it all and wait because I knew. And just as I’d hoped, he—they have come for me.

Rock was sure of it even before she saw him with her own eyes.

She was about to see Ebel again.

As she raced through the narrow corridors, she gradually started to make out more of the noises. Multiple screams and the sounds of people running around like crazy mixed into the louder bangs and crashes of stuff being destroyed. It sounded like beasts were going on a wild rampage.

Rock relied on those sounds to navigate her way through the mazelike corridors of the ancient ruins.

When she finally managed to return to what she assumed was the living quarters, Krister flashed to the front of her thoughts.

He should’ve been somewhere behind one of the many doors.

If she was going to run for it, then she should take him with her, but he’d only one good leg now. She didn’t have the strength or stamina to escape while supporting an adult man.

But rescuing him shouldn’t be hard if she could meet up with Ebel and the others. She had nothing to lose by confirming his whereabouts first.

With that in mind, Rock started searching the familiar living quarters.

Relying on her memory, she threw open the wooden doors and cloth partitions.

Every single room was empty—only the beds and simple furniture remained.

It seemed like the cultists cohabited here, but maybe the residents had fled in all the commotion. Chairs were knocked over in some of the rooms, and half-eaten bread and opened books were left atop the tables.

The identical rooms continued on endlessly, with Krister's workshop nowhere in sight.

I hope he got out all right, Rock thought as she left the nth room she'd checked.

Suddenly, someone clad in a blue robe appeared in the corridor she thought was empty.

It was a tall man. He had the hood low over his face, obscuring it from view, but he was quickly coming her way.

Rock freaked out for a moment, her back pressed up against the door, keeping her out of sight.

She considered running for it, but the robed man didn't seem to be after Rock. He walked by as if he couldn't care less about her, so Rock tried to run past him like she was fleeing the commotion.

"...!"

Then the man's arm shot out and caught Rock around the waist.

Rock jumped back and cautiously looked up, just as the man used his other hand to pull down his hood.

"Don't run away and spoil our touching reunion."

The devious grin that appeared made Rock's voice crack.

"...Father!"

There was her father's face that was so comforting she could cry.

He had his chestnut-colored tresses tied back and his beautiful skin free of makeup. His blue eyes gazed down at his daughter lovingly.

Driven by joy and relief, Rock flung herself at him, and Phoebe caught his daughter, wrapping her up in his strong arms.

"Sorry I took so long, Roxy."

“Don’t be. I’m glad you came,” she said, rubbing her face into her father’s muscled chest. It felt weird to press her cheek against the robe’s strange fabric rather than her father’s usual dresses, but it was still reassuring nevertheless.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t do anything when it happened. You were kidnapped right before my eyes...”

“It’s all good, as long as you’re safe, Father. And I’m grateful you came for me.” After telling him the honest truth, Rock tugged on the robe he was wearing. “But where’d this come from? Why are you wearing it?”

Phoebe was wearing the blue wool satin faille robe over his favorite leather armor. She could see his sword pommel poking out through the robe opening, telling her he’d come armed for a fight.

“I *borrowed* it from a guy,” Phoebe answered without a lick of guilt. Then he caressed his daughter’s cheeks in both hands and turned serious.

“We couldn’t just barge in through the front doors, y’know? We were able to follow the Alexis family’s carriage thanks to the dove you set free, but things got trickier from there. We made a couple of people outside and inside the ruins take a little nap and stripped them of these robes that are *seriously* in bad taste.”

He cast his gaze toward the unceasing ruckus.

“His Excellency, Lord Linus, and I came down into the ruins. Lady Michaela and Johanna are waiting in the carriages outside.”

Apparently, this was a full-scale rescue mission.

Rock was moved to tears as she thought of each person who had come for her.

“You’ll reach the main sanctuary if you return down the path I came. You can’t miss it—the hall’s full of benches.”

Phoebe jabbed his thumb over his shoulder, pointing out his path. The main sanctuary room was probably the same space she’d passed on her way here. She’d seen the cultists with their heads bowed in prayer there.

“His Excellency and Lord Linus are tearing the place apart as we speak. The

plan was to scare the living daylights outta the cultists until they ran for it, which seems to have gone swimmingly. It's safer there now. Go to him."

"Okay. Thank you, Father." Rock nodded, then shared the information she had obtained during her time there. "By the way, I ran into Krister here."

Phoebe furrowed his brows.

"Krister? Was he in one piece?"

"He's alive. He said they broke his leg when they kidnapped him."

"And here I thought he'd willingly joined their ranks," Phoebe said sarcastically, but he couldn't hide his smile. He was probably relieved to hear the other tailor was mostly okay.

"I met with him in this area earlier. He might still be around here somewhere."

"Should I fetch him while I scout out the area?"

Phoebe seemed keen on looking for him, so Rock quickly let him know what he needed to watch out for.

"Watch out, Lord and Lady Alexis are further in. They're with someone called the bishop, who seems like a child to me."

"A *child*?" Phoebe raised an eyebrow but shook his head, seemingly deciding it was best not to think about it. "I'll just look for Krister right now. Go find His Excellency in the sanctuary."

"I will. But try not to get hurt, Father."

Rock trusted her father's skills, but she still worried about him.

"I won't get hurt," Phoebe answered her worry with confidence. "We've gotta get home and open up shop before the dust settles."

"You've got that right. I'd hate for everyone to think we ran away from paying rent."

Keeping the shop closed for days was horrible for business.

If we get home safe, I need to quickly get business going again and make back our losses.

“See you later, Roxy,” Phoebe said, lowering his arms so she could leave. But after looking down at her face like he was loath to part with her, he closed the gap between them and pecked her on the forehead.

The sensation tickled a laugh out of her.

“That’s embarrassing, Father.”

“You did it first. I’m just getting revenge!”

After that light exchange, father and daughter temporarily parted with a smile.

Rock broke into another run toward the sanctuary.

The ruckus sounded as loud as ever, and she even heard beastly howls. It was kind of funny, trying to imagine Ebel and Guido trashing the place, given their usual demeanor.

Thinking about them filled Rock with joy.

She was dying to see him and thank him.

Phoebe’s directions accurately led her straight into the sanctuary.

The room she’d passed through mere hours ago looked like a disaster site with all the benches smashed to pieces. Nothing was left standing. The werewolves had trashed everything from the tapestries covering the limestone walls to the rugs and even the altar.

Only two figures loomed in that destroyed space—both sharing the same black fur, triangular ears, sharp fangs, and golden eyes.

The two werewolves turned toward Rock in unison as she bounded into the room.

“Roxy!” one of them howled, his golden eyes flaring open.

Rock knew it was him. It didn’t matter how many werewolves were around, she’d never mistake his velvety voice.

She dashed toward him, jumping over the debris in her path. She nearly tripped over a broken bench, but by that point, two furry arms had already wrapped her in their secure embrace.

“Ebel! I knew you’d come!” Rock cried out, throwing her arms around him. Ebel rubbed his wet nose and furry cheek against her head.

“I’m so glad you’re all right, Roxy!”

“I’m perfectly okay, thanks to you,” she answered, gazing into the golden eyes just above her.

Even the color of those eyes, which was unique to werewolves, were beautiful and precious when she associated them with him. Of the several different werewolves she’d met, only Ebel’s visage was special to her. Unable to resist that beloved fluff, Rock returned his nuzzle by rubbing her cheek against his.

“Thank you so, so much...for coming.”

“You are my light. I can’t live without you,” Ebel said, his voice trembling with every emotion.

A surly sigh echoed behind the hugging couple.

Rock looked over her shoulder to see the other werewolf giving his broad shoulders a cynical shrug.

“It would’ve been entertaining if you picked wrong. How could you tell just by his voice?”

That whining voice undeniably belonged to Guido Linus.

“Roxy would *never* mistake you for me,” Ebel retorted with absolute confidence and looked to Rock for affirmation.

“*Hmph!* You say that when even we can’t tell each other apart in the mirror?” Guido snorted, sounding a little jealous, which got a laugh out of Rock.

“I can’t tell your faces apart, but I know Ebel’s body.”

“Right, you’ve measured me in this form before, too,” Ebel said, backing her up with a wolfish nod.

But Guido was the kind of man who wasn’t satisfied unless he got the last word. His nostrils flared with a second snort.

“And what kind of *measuring* was that? Can you swear before God that that

was a chaste act, Ebel?”

Rock and Ebel instinctively looked at each other when they heard his quip.

“I’m sorry,” Ebel said with a chuckle to the blushing Rock. “Guido can’t help feeling embarrassed and awkward around you.”

That probably had something to do with the quarrel they’d had before Michaela’s birthday party. Not only did Rock not care about that anymore, but she was actually grateful to the Linus siblings now.

“I am truly grateful to Lord Linus and his sister,” she said from within Ebel’s arms.

“You should be. Make sure you tell Michaela the same thing,” Guido shot back.

Seeing as he was still hung up on his younger sister, not much had changed since he’d become a werewolf.

After celebrating their safe reunion, Rock told the two werewolves about running into Phoebe and the information she’d shared with him.

“Father went to search for Krister.”

“...Is that the other kidnapped tailor you told me about?” Guido asked Ebel.

“Yeah.” Ebel nodded, then placed a furry hand on his chin. “Still, a bishop...? I guess it’s not all *that* strange for a cult to have clergy.”

“I have a lot to ask that little pipsqueak.”

Anger seeped from Guido’s voice, the fur between his flattened ears standing on end.

Rock felt the same way, and she was sure Ebel did too. The Werewolf Brotherhood could never be forgiven for disrupting so many lives.

Maybe putting the squeeze on the bishop would lead them to the truth about the abominable Brotherhood and its curse.

They were facing both a crisis and a golden opportunity.

“Let’s capture them alive,” Rock declared, and Ebel laughed.

“Your bravery is admirable, but you should leave the ruins first.”

“Because you’ll only slow us down.”

That last remark, obviously, came from Guido.

Rock couldn’t deny it, so she reluctantly agreed.

“Everyone will be out of sorts if you get hurt—especially me,” Ebel proclaimed as he lifted Rock into the air with both arms. After gazing longingly at her with his golden eyes, he closed his fang-filled mouth and rubbed it against her forehead in a doglike kiss.

Rock cracked up laughing.

“Father just did the same thing to me.”

Ebel’s eyes widened with shock before he burst out laughing too.

“Looks like he beat me to it. In that case, I’ll find another place to do it when we get home.”

“Another place? Like?”

Ebel turned toward Guido without answering Rock’s query.

“I’ll bring her out to the carriage first.”

“All ri—” Guido stopped in the middle of answering, his pointed ears flicking forward. “No, wait. Someone’s coming.”

Right after he said that, Rock also heard the sound of hurried footsteps. She looked over her shoulder with a start to see someone rush into the desolated sanctuary.

“Where are you planning to take my daughter?”

Placido Alexis, dressed in the blue robe, asked that in a growl of suppressed rage. His expression brimmed with anger as he glared at Ebel holding Rock.

Lauretta staggered out into the sanctuary behind him, her face whiter than a sheet.

“Aaah! Roxy!”

She let out a scream that sounded like ripping silk when she saw a werewolf

about to make off with her niece.

Rock felt her heart sink when she saw Lord and Lady Alexis.

She'd hoped to leave without running into them again, because she knew it'd cause strife if they saw her.

The way they saw it, some rampaging werewolf was in the middle of abducting their precious niece.

It didn't help the situation that they were standing in a space that no longer looked anything like the sanctuary, with mountains of debris from shattered furniture and clawed tapestries. The hall was deathly quiet, now that the people who prayed there had all fled.

Who would ever believe these werewolves were capable of reason?

"Darling, Roxy is...Roxy is...!" Laretta clung to her husband's arm in horror.

"I know. Stand back. It's going to get dangerous."

Placido pushed his wife behind him and stared down the two werewolves. His expression was threatening as he spoke. "I was wondering who we were dealing with when I heard there was a rampage, but you seem awfully *docile*."

Placido didn't seem scared, even when he was facing two werewolves. It was quite the opposite. His golden eyes had narrowed to slits as he assessed them.

"I don't know who you are, but you *will* unhand my daughter," he ordered in a low, threatening voice. "You understand me, don't you?"

The two werewolves exchanged looks with the same gold eyes.

Rock didn't know what was communicated between them, but Ebel quietly answered Placido.

"...She's *not* your daughter."

Both husband and wife gaped at him.

"That voice... You're Count Mateus?!"

"I knew it! Your eye color really *is*...!"

"Yes, Lord Alexis. They are the same as yours." Ebel's gaze was concentrated

on Placido as he held Rock in his arms like a precious jewel. “What differentiates us is that I was cursed against my wishes and obtained this power without ever wanting it. Still, I am happy that I have the power to save her.”

Rock silently clung to Ebel’s chest. His fluffy black fur was warm.

“You call this saving? You’re just abducting her!” Placido raved. “I won’t go easy on you, even if you *are* a count, if you dare take my daughter away!”

“That’s exactly what you did to me several days ago. I am merely returning her to her parent, as she requested of me.”

Lauretta and Placido had no intention of listening to Ebel’s side of things. They shouted at him in unison.

“We merely took back our rightful child!”

“Her parents are right here! We *are* her parents!”

Placido was one thing, but Lauretta also seemed to think they had legitimate reasons for kidnapping Rock.

This only saddened her.

Her aunt’s thoughts and feelings were extreme and insane, yet also pure. Her yearning for her deceased sister was being used by some malicious force.

And because of his deep love for Lauretta, Placido was also being manipulated.

“You’ve both lost your minds!” Rock shouted back at her aunt and uncle.

Indescribable apprehension and fretfulness surged within her, even though she was safe in Ebel’s arms.

I can’t let them get any more involved with the Werewolf Brotherhood. I can’t let them stay here.

Something within her warned her of that.

“It doesn’t matter what reason you might have, taking someone against their will is unforgivable!”

Lauretta stepped back as if she’d been struck by lightning when she heard Rock’s reproach.

“Roxy...?”

Placido looked over his shoulder, his brows snapping together when he confirmed his wife’s shattered expression.

“Stop it, Roxy! If you keep this up, I won’t forgive even you!”

He was trapped by his fanatical obsession with protecting his wife.

It didn’t matter what was said—none of it would reach him now.

Likely because of the curse lurking within the ruins.

Guido stepped forward when Rock reluctantly bit her tongue, knowing she couldn’t reach them.

“Ebel, it looks like we’re gonna have a fight on our hands.”

Placido’s frigid gaze shifted to Guido when he heard his voice.

“Lord Linus...you’re one too, then?”

“I apologize for not greeting you as a fellow wolf the last time we met,” Guido snarked, then whispered to Ebel. “You’ve got baggage to handle. Go. I’ll take care of things here.”

Needless to say, the baggage he was referring to was Rock. Ebel’s pointy ears flicked back in annoyance, despite Rock not minding the dig.

“Don’t say it like that. She’s not baggage! She’s my treasure.”

“I’m not buying time so you can flirt. Go on. Get outta here.”

Guido shooed them away with his furry hand. Sharp nails glinted on his fingertips.

“...Thank you,” Ebel said after a second’s pause.

“I won’t let you leave!” Placido howled. “You *can’t* have my daughter! I’m taking her back!”

He pushed Laretta away to protect her and leaped off the wrecked floor.

His body rapidly gained mass as he flew through the air.

The blue robe and the rest of his clothes burst off his swelling torso and limbs. His hair and face transformed as if swallowed whole by a wave of rippling, black

fur, and in the instant Rock blinked, a puissant werewolf appeared. His eyes remained the same golden color, but the gaping maw of bladelike incisors and canines proved he was no longer human.

By the time his muscular legs landed with beastlike agility on the floor, Placido's body had fully transformed into a werewolf that looked just like the other two.

"Darling!" Laretta screamed.

Her scream was not one of fear but a warning signaling the bloody fight about to ensue.

Whether he'd heard her or not, Placido charged straight at Ebel and Rock.

"What're you still doing here?! *Go* already!" Guido howled, grabbing the charging Placido before he could reach them.

The two werewolves collided head-on, and bones cracked as their fists slammed into each other. When Guido brutally slammed his fist into Placido's face, Placido staggered and quickly regained his balance, tearing Guido's ear with his claws.

Laretta let out another ear-piercing scream as a small amount of blood splattered around them.

"Stop it! Just stop it!"

"Ebel!"

Rock looked up at Ebel to put a stop to it too. At this rate, no matter who won, injury to both sides was inevitable. The fight between werewolves was too brutal, unforgiving, and terrifying.

"...I know. I'm sorry."

The werewolf face she was so familiar with tensed with determination. She heard what sounded like his fangs grinding together before he nodded.

"Stay here. I'll put an end to this now!"

He gently placed Rock behind a toppled bench and then bounded to join the fight.

“Be careful!”

Rock crouched behind the bench and watched the muscles in his broad back ripple as he ran.

She could understand why Laretta kept screaming. She was unbearably worried about Ebel too. But she didn't want to see Michaela saddened by the result of this fight—and she obviously didn't want to devastate Laretta either.

The battlefield instantly turned in their favor, with Ebel joining the werewolf scuffle.

Not even Placido could hold his ground against two werewolves. His arms were pinned behind his back by Ebel, and when he finally shook him off, he had to contend with Guido coming at him from the front.

In the blink of an eye, Guido had Placido knocked to the ground, thrashing to get his pinned arms free.

“Let go! Let go of meeee!”

He must've taken a few punches to the mouth because he spat blood as he howled at them. He was breathing heavily, his body trembling with the effort.

Even Guido and Ebel's shoulders rose and fell with their ragged breaths as they tried to hold him still, and clumps of blood had already begun to solidify in Guido's fur.

“Are you trying to shame yourself this late in the game, Lord Alexis?!” Guido roared.

“There's nothing to be ashamed of!” Placido spat back through shaky breaths. “I'm fighting for the people I love!”

He struggled even harder to escape but couldn't free himself of their grip.

“Sorry, but I need you to take a little nap!” Ebel politely warned him before smashing Placido's head into the ground.

Rock heard a loud moan and saw his wolflike jaw hit the floor.

This was entirely different from any of the fights she saw on a daily basis in the slums. Both sides had an unshakeable reason not to back down, a resolve

they weren't willing to compromise on, and so it became a fight that tragically shed blood. From the sidelines, their desperation was painful to see and too brutal and cruel to watch.

Still, Rock didn't look away, she needed to see Ebel was okay with her own eyes from behind the wreckage.

And it was only because she kept her eyes peeled that she immediately noticed another person had entered the sanctuary.

It was the young bishop dressed in a blue robe and white mask.

They appeared with a confident, relaxed gait that belied their age, stopped in the doorway, and raised both arms as they chanted their orders.

"Lauretta Alexis! Protect your beloved husband!"

Lauretta's head jerked up in horror at the sound of that innocent voice. Startled, she turned her eyes to the bishop, looking as if she'd just received divine orders to kill herself.

"Bishop...what do you mean...?"

"Now is the time to receive new power from the statue!" the bishop declared, pulling a small statue from their robe pocket.

It was a terrifyingly sinister werewolf statue made out of coarse, white quicklime.

Rock instantly recognized it for what it was. She stopped breathing when she saw it.

"NO!"

Rock instinctively jumped into action as she screamed.

Ebel and Guido couldn't move. She'd no choice but to take matters into her own hands. She couldn't let Lauretta fall under the curse.

Rock dashed as fast as she could through the rubble toward them.

Lauretta was undoubtedly drawn to the curse now. She was overcome by the desire to save her husband, and that pushed her over the edge. Rock saw her staggering on unsteady feet toward the bishop as if they were offering Lauretta

their one and only hope.

The bishop waited there with obnoxious confidence that Laretta would come to them.

“I won’t let you!”

Right in front of Rock was a piece of a bench someone had broken in half.

Half of a bench should’ve been too heavy for Rock’s slender arms to pick up. Yet, she managed to lift it up then and there. Clenching her teeth, she swung the piece of wood up and chucked it in front of Laretta as she crept forward.

“KYAAH!”

Laretta fell backward as the heavy object flew past her.

Rock kept running. Her next objective was the bishop. Stopping them would put an end to everything.

“Wh-What?”

The bishop seemed to notice Rock’s quick approach from under their mask. Rock heard their confused, childish squeak, but it didn’t stop her.

“GO TO HELLLL!”

Rock drew her fist all the way back and slammed it as hard as her momentum would take it into the mask.

Rock was mocked daily for how weak she appeared as a male tailor, but she was up against a much younger child. She was confident she wouldn’t lose, and she’d no intention of holding back either.

More than anything, she held onto the hope that putting a stop to this child would bring her aunt and uncle back to their senses.

With that thought propelling her, she didn’t hesitate to punch them as hard as she could.

“UGH!”

The moment her fist hit the mask, she heard the bishop moan.

Immediately after a dull pain ran up Rock’s hand, there was a crisp sound, and

the bishop's mask cracked clean in half.



The bishop fell backward with the impact. The werewolf statue fell from their small hand, and the shattered mask hit the ground.

Rock stood there with her fist out for a long while.

As an amateur fighter, she thought that pose better prepared her to get another hit in. But anyone looking would only see it as her frozen in place.

Meanwhile, the bishop who was struck by Rock's weak punch didn't move either.

They showed no signs of getting up from where they laid flat on their back. They neither moaned nor cursed her. Rather, the lack of movement made her worry they'd stopped breathing.

Eventually, she was concerned enough to check, so she cautiously approached them while keeping her fist out.

The face she saw was as strikingly young as the voice.

"What...? This *child* was behind it all?"

She could tell he was an innocent little boy even with his eyes pressed shut. He looked around ten years old, had light-brown hair, a round face, and freckled cheeks. He didn't look like a villain or someone capable of leading a cult.

His cheek was swollen, but he was still breathing. Rock didn't think her punch was strong enough to knock him unconscious, but he didn't move even while she was closely staring at his face.

"Roxy, are you all right?" Ebel called, his hands still full with keeping Placido pinned.

"Yes," Rock responded, just as Laretta suddenly started screaming like someone who'd just woken up from a trance.

"What...what was I about to do— Noooooooooooooooooo!"

Apparently, she'd regained her senses. She tightly hugged her shoulders and started shaking on the ground from her overwhelming fear.

"I-I was just about to become a werewolf too! About to give my body and soul

over to that...that *curse!* I was trying to gain power to **kill** people! But I n-never wanted that!”

“Auntie, calm down, please!” Rock raced over to her aunt and pulled her to her chest to stop her shaking. “You were being controlled. You know that, right? You didn’t do anything bad, right?”

Lauretta clung to Rock too.

“No, no! I wasn’t trying to! I never wanted to kill anyone!”

“I know that, Auntie! I *do!* So please don’t beat yourself up!”

“But even if I escaped the curse, my husband...!” Lauretta’s quivering voice caught in her throat.

Her gaze went to her werewolf husband being held to the ground by two other werewolves.

Placido also seemed to be in the middle of waking up from a nightmare. He slowly raised his head, his golden eyes shimmering when he returned his wife’s gaze.

He said he’d willingly offered himself up to the curse for his wife. And he’d used and abused that power in whatever way necessary to satisfy his desire to ease his wife’s broken heart.

So how did they both feel now that they had regained their sanity?

“Lauretta...”

The werewolf’s big mouth moved to quietly utter that name.

Ebel and Guido slowly let go and backed away. Placido rose to his feet and plodded toward his wife.

Borrowing Rock’s hand, Lauretta barely managed to stand and hobble toward her husband.

Husband and wife embraced in the middle of the devastated sanctuary hall, as if magnetically drawn to each other. Lauretta instantly broke down and began quietly crying into her husband’s furry chest.

“I’m so sorry, darling...! There was no need for you to get cursed, but you

ended up with this body because of me...!”

Placido supported his wife in his arms and answered her feebly. “It’s not your fault. Please don’t let it hurt you so deeply.”

“But—”

“Besides, there’s someone else we have to apologize to first. Don’t you think so, too?” After saying that in a persuasive voice, Placido turned toward Rock. His triangular ears fell flat against his head as he addressed her. “We’ve done something we can never apologize enough to you for, Roxy. I’m truly sorry to have frightened you.”

Rock naturally struggled with how to word her response.

She was undeniably angered by his actions. But she didn’t have it in her to denounce the couple when she witnessed firsthand how they weren’t entirely in control of themselves when it happened.

“...I’m glad you’re back to yourselves,” she finally managed to squeeze out.

Placido deeply bowed his head to her. “We will do *anything* to atone for our actions.”

“You don’t have to do that...”

Rock honestly didn’t know how to respond. She had mixed emotions because she had lost a target to direct her anger toward.

Well, there was still someone who fit the bill—the person who manipulated the Alexises and led the Brotherhood sect located in these ruins. He was the main culprit behind it all.

But the boy bishop had yet to regain consciousness.

Ebel and Guido approached him in turns, bending their enormous werewolf bodies to get a good look at his adolescent face. Neither of them seemed convinced he could be the ringleader.

“What’s with the boy? Why’s he here?” Ebel asked.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Guido responded. “But it’s a fact he came into the room wielding a werewolf statue.”

“Then he’s a member of the Brotherhood? This small child?”

“Don’t ask me, Ebel. I want to know as badly as you do.”

“Everyone here called that child the bishop,” Rock interjected into their conversation.

“This little punk is?!” Guido was so shocked, his tail shot up in alarm. “You must be kidding, tailor! How could a prepubescent child lead a cult?”

“I have a hard time believing it too. But he seemed to be respected by everyone here, and he spoke with confidence.”

While he sounded confident, his tone was still childish, as if he was reciting a script he was made to memorize by some adult.

Rock was suddenly worried that he might not remember a thing after he woke up, now that his mask was broken.

“If you don’t believe it, let’s just ask the boy himself.” Ebel quickly accepted reality and told Guido what to do next. “Let’s take him back alive as discussed. Guido, carry him.”

“Fine. I’ll make him cough up every last detail when he wakes up.”

Guido accepted the situation and gently scooped up the boy clad in a blue robe.

The boy still didn’t wake up. His expression was peaceful, as if he was just in a deep slumber.

“The kid doesn’t even know how easy he has it...”

Ebel offered Rock his hand as she muttered to herself.

“We should get moving too, Roxy. Your father should be back soon.”

“I’m sure he will be. I hope he found Krister.”

Rock nodded and took hold of his big, furry hand. As soon as she did, Ebel pulled her to him and easily lifted her into his arms.

“I-I can walk on my *own*, thank you!”

Ebel’s tail swished in response to her panic.

“We’ve finally reunited. I don’t want to be apart from you for even a second.”

“W-Well...when you put it like that...”

Rock couldn’t help but accept the situation when he said it with such earnest seriousness. Snuggled up against his broad chest, Rock called out to Lord and Lady Alexis.

“Uncle, Auntie, I’ve some stuff I would like to ask you about once things have calmed down.”

“All right.”

Lauretta looked anxiously up at her husband, who appeared prepared to accept whatever Rock had to say to them.

Feeling a prick in her chest as well, Rock purposely urged them forward in a cheerful voice.

“Let’s get out of here first.”

Phoebe strolled into the sanctuary then, as if he were waiting for the right timing.

“I went all the way in and checked out the place. This guy’s the last person left.”

He had his arm around Krister’s shoulder, helping him walk with one bum leg.

“Father!”

Phoebe flashed a triumphant smile at his daughter. “Hey there, kiddo. Things look awfully hunky-dory here. Did you guys work things out?”

“At least for now? We captured the Brotherhood’s bishop alive, but...”

Rock and Ebel looked to Guido, who pointed to the boy he had slung over his shoulder. Phoebe’s eyes bulged when he saw that tiny body.

“*That’s* the bishop? Am I the only one who sees a little kid?”

“That’s all I see, too,” Rock sighed.

“I fear I’m the same. We need to question him.”

Just as father, daughter, and Ebel confirmed they weren’t seeing things,

Krister suddenly screamed in a shrill voice.

“Werewolves! Three werewolves! Talking werewolves!”

“You only just noticed...?” Phoebe let out a dry laugh, and Krister started babbling like a mad man.

“I’m hella confused, man! Phoebe ain’t dressed like a lady, but a man and is Rock’s da. Rock’s dressed like a lady, surrounded by three werewolves, and all the cultists are gone. What the hell is goin’ on?!”

“Come on, calm down, Krister,” Rock said to pacify the other tailor, who seemed to be losing his mind amidst all the chaos.

“How can you expect me to be calm?! Besides, are you okay over there?!”

Krister looked at Rock cradled in Ebel’s arms as he might a child being carried off in a wolf’s mouth. Naturally, none of the werewolves in the room were a threat.

“There are some good werewolves too,” Rock insisted. “At least no one here is going to hurt you. You can go home now, Krister.”

“Go...home...?” Krister repeated, still failing to see what was going on.

Phoebe readjusted his grip on him to hurry things along.

“Anyway, let’s get outta here. I don’t want to stay any longer in this dusty dungeon.”

With that, Rock, Ebel, Phoebe, Krister, Guido carrying the bishop, and the Alexises all escaped from the ancient ruins.

Not a single soul could be sensed anywhere near the ruins, which had been destroyed from the entrance on. The cultists seemed to have all fled. Perhaps they too, were awaking from a trancelike dream.

Once they made it outside, their party was greeted by three carriages.

One belonged to the Alexises, and the remaining two belonged to Mateus Manor and Linus Manor respectively.

“Master Rock!”

“Roxy!”

Rock squinted her eyes in the direction she heard two ladies' voices.

Johanna and Michaela had jumped out from behind the carriages parked on top of the small hill, illuminated by the setting sun.

Ebel lowered Rock to the ground as the girls ran down the hill toward them. Thanks to that, Rock was stuck catching both girls as they lunged at her, arms open.

"I'm so glad! So, so glad you are safe!"

"Aaah, Roxy! I'm glad I could keep my promise!"

Johanna and Michaela's teary voices brought tears to Rock's eyes too.

"Thank you, both of you."

"...You give this tailor a grander welcome than your brother? I can't say I approve," Guido grumbled with displeasure.

Michaela looked up at him with a watery smile. "I'll be sure to shower you with thanks later, Brother!" She took a breath and wiped away her tears before continuing with more authority. "We took custody of everyone who fled from the ruins. They all said, 'I don't know anything. I don't even know what I'm doing here.' But I plan to question them all anyway."

"This is our only clue too."

Guido lifted up the boy on his shoulder to show her. Michaela blinked several times but then must've determined it was going to be a long story.

"Let's return home first," she replied, her expression stern. "Roxy, Brother, Ebel, and...everyone else needs a moment's rest before we get into it."

Meanwhile, Danilo rushed down the hill to greet Lord and Lady Alexis.

Had he been waiting outside the whole time? Did some sort of exchange happen between him and Michaela's group? Whatever went on, he broke down crying the second he saw his masters' faces.

"Lord Alexis, Lady Alexis...I'm so relieved to see you're safe...!"

They both stared at their sobbing butler in stunned silence.

"Danilo... Forgive us for making you worry."

“We are *truly* sorry...”

Husband and wife both rubbed his back as he crouched on the ground wiping his tears. Rock watched them interact at a distance.

Although it was only for a few days, and unwilling on her part, these were the people whose roof she’d stayed under. She was deeply moved to see change take place in their lives.

Ebel also watched over them for a time. But then, perhaps because the sun had set, he shook his head and called out to the group.

“It’s important to confirm everyone’s wellbeing, but we can’t stay here forever. We should all board the carriages and return to my manor first.”

Three werewolves were among them, after all.

They may have been on the capital outskirts, but that didn’t guarantee merchants and hunters wouldn’t pass by and see them.

Each carriage was boarded by one werewolf.

The rest squeezed into the cramped, leftover spaces.

Ebel, Rock, Phoebe, Krister, and Johanna all piled into the Mateus carriage. Ebel didn’t want to part from Rock, nor did Phoebe, but Krister refused to ride with people he didn’t know, and Johanna pulled a face like she’d never board another noble’s carriage.

Naturally, the carriage felt as cramped as a sardine can, and Rock sat practically buried into Ebel’s fur.

Ludovicus, the butler, sat holding the reins in the coachman’s seat. Their carriage moved quite a bit slower than the other two.

“A pretty big group came to my rescue, huh?” Rock said into Ebel’s fluff from a position where she couldn’t see his face.

“Wolves form packs, after all,” Ebel replied, his arms tightening around her.

“Does that make *me* one of the wolves?” Phoebe laughed, shrugging in the tight space.

“That makes me one too!” Johanna happily joined in. “I’m another wolf!”

“...What the hell is wrong with you people?”

Krister eyed them like they were all insane, but it'd take too long to explain.

For now, Rock entrusted herself to Ebel's furry body in the shaking carriage to enjoy every moment of their safe reunion.

Chapter 6: Never Let Go

AFTER returning to Mateus Manor, the group gathered in the largest reception room without taking much time to rest up first.

The boy bishop was still unconscious, and they had brought him into one of the many guest rooms to sleep it off. Phoebe had offered to keep watch over him.

Krister was resting in another room. He was debilitated and his leg was in bad shape, so they'd called for a doctor to come at once.

With everyone else out of the picture, only Lord and Lady Alexis were left to question.

Rock, Ebel, Guido, and Michaela surrounded Danilo, Placido, and Lauretta, who were still in a stunned state.

"...I now understand that we've done something that can never be undone," Placido weakly admitted.

He'd returned to human form and borrowed some clothes from Ebel. Lauretta had fixed his disheveled hair for him, but his withdrawn face looked like it'd aged years over the last few hours.

"Clearly, neither of us was in our right mind. I especially couldn't keep it together when it came to my wife."

Lauretta clung to Placido's shoulder like it was her only lifeline in the world as he spoke about their experience.

"My wife lost one parent after the other in rapid succession, and just knowing her younger sister was out there somewhere seemed to offer her a fleeting comfort. But then she also lost her sister, which sank her into even greater depression. She knew she had a niece but completely lost track of her whereabouts after Valencia's death, further destabilizing her."

Rock had met Phoebe and opened up her tailor shop in the slums around that time. She wasn't at fault for it, but knowing about her aunt's suffering still pained her.

"I think the Brotherhood took advantage of that weakness."

Guido arched an eyebrow at that. "You *think*? That's an ambiguous way to put it."

Placido's expression darkened.

"You may think I'm making up excuses, but...neither I nor my wife can remember exactly *how* we were invited into the Brotherhood."

"...No way."

"I'm sorry to say it's true. At least Danilo remembers enough to help us figure out a timeline."

Going from Danilo's account, Lord and Lady Alexis seemed to have joined the Werewolf Brotherhood three months ago.

The married couple often went to a church in the holy church district to see if that'd help alleviate Laretta's worsening depression. There, they were approached by a member of the cult who won them over with just the right words, and before they knew it, they started visiting the sanctuary in the ancient ruins.

According to Danilo, they seemed to have been targeted in hopes of them becoming big donators to the cause. It hadn't been long since the Brotherhood set up shop in those particular ruins, and their efforts in the capital remained modest due to a lack of funds and members. In fact, Danilo could prove a significant amount of the Alexis family assets had gone to the cult.

However, the Brotherhood's first sacrifice was decided when the noble couple's anguish caught the bishop's attention.

"I tried to stop His Lordship."

Danilo seemed to remember that moment well. He trembled and paled at the memory.

"The more I heard about it, the stranger it sounded. I wondered if a blessing

granted by werewolves was actually capable of saving people—if a power that required changing your very shape and being could actually bring about true happiness... But not a word of advice or warning I uttered ever reached His Lordship. He kept repeating ‘I must accept this blessing’ just because the bishop recommended it. It almost seemed like he’d become a different person.”

Even the breaths he took as he spoke quivered with the fear that memory brought back.

“I wasn’t present for the ritual. I was far too scared to join him. I saw His Lordship’s eyes had turned the shade of gold when he returned home, I witnessed the moment he transformed into a werewolf, and then when I saw His Lordship and Her Ladyship embrace like they had found the answer, I felt the need to continue supporting them...”

“I must apologize to you as well, Danilo. I’m sorry.”

When Placido gave his heartrending apology, Danilo began to weep aloud, perhaps realizing he didn’t have to hold it in any longer.

Watching them also pained Rock, Ebel, and Michaela too.

“I might’ve been able to stop you if we’d met sooner...” Rock muttered exactly how she felt, but Placido only shook his head.

“You mustn’t blame yourself. It was all our own doing.” Then he pressed his fingers against his temples as if in pain. “Besides...I doubt I could’ve resisted the call even if you were there to stop me. That voice endlessly echoed in my head, guiding me...”

“What voice?” Ebel leaned forward, keen to hear the rest. “Are you saying that statue called out to you as well, Lord Alexis?”

“Indeed. That was undeniably its voice,” Placido confirmed. “‘Offer up thy blood, receive my power,’ it incessantly whispered to me in an encouraging, melodious tone.”

Guido jumped off the sofa as if he’d been pinched. “Me too! I definitely heard that same voice!”

“Brother...”

Michaela's beautiful face tensed and Guido's expression filled with regret.

"I was also tempted into accepting that curse by that voice..." he lamented with clenched fists. "I should have never listened to its trickery!"

He tried to crouch on the floor, but was hindered by the clothes he'd also borrowed from Ebel. The suit was a little tight on the taller Guido, and he immediately stood back up with a scowl.

"Ebel! Don't you have any looser clothing?! I can't even let myself go through the motions of being stricken with grief and anger wearing these!"

"I'll make sure to have clothing in your size on hand from now on," Ebel said with a light chuckle. Then he gloomily pushed up his burnt sienna hair. "It appears we were all given the werewolf curse by the same being. But for what purpose? And how many more lives will it destroy before it's satisfied...?"

That mystery still remained unsolved.

Who was turning humans into werewolves, for what purpose, and how many?

Rock initially believed the Brotherhood was the main culprit.

However, according to Michaela, who'd been waiting for them outside the ancient ruins, every cultist who'd fled after Ebel and Guido went rampaging said the same exact thing:

"I don't know why I was there. I was this close to getting cursed."

Not a single one among them had golden eyes.

"I asked for all their names and addresses just in case," Michaela explained with a long face. "But...to be perfectly honest, I don't think they can provide us with any useful information because as soon as they exited the ruins, they all had the look of someone who was just conned without realizing it."

"Do you think they also didn't join the Brotherhood of their own volition?" Rock asked.

"It seems that way," she replied. "Most of them are commoners who live in the capital, and those who couldn't donate money seemed to be doing physical labor for the Brotherhood inside the ruins."

The living quarters Rock saw in the ruins were probably for those particular members. They were likely recruited and drawn into the Brotherhood the same way Lord and Lady Alexis were.

If all the cultists were brainwashed into joining, then that didn't leave many leads to probe into the truth of the matter.

"What about that male tailor?" Guido asked Rock in a frustrated voice. "He may have been a captive, but he still lived there with them. He must know *something*."

"I plan to ask him about it," Rock replied, but she didn't expect it to amount to much.

Krister looked terrified and exhausted when she saw him in that cramped workshop. She highly doubted he was in the right state of mind to remember everything he saw and heard in those ruins.

"That bishop's our only other lead, eh?" Ebel looked up at the ceiling.

The boy was lying on a bed in the guest room on the floor directly above them.

He still hadn't woken up after being brought inside Mateus Manor.

Rock was afraid her punch had given him a fatal head injury, but her father and the rest laughed at her. She hadn't hit him hard enough for that.

"I know I'm starting to sound like a broken record, but he doesn't look like anything other than a small child to me." Guido even doubted the fact the boy was the cult's bishop. "Did he really lead the Brotherhood?"

"Yes, no doubt about it," Laretta assured him. She dug through her memories under the watchful and caring eyes of her husband. "He was definitely a young boy. He was short and skinny, with an innocent voice... But he always sounded confident when he spoke of the Brotherhood's precepts, almost like he knew everything."

That matched up with Rock's impression of him as well.

Although he spoke like a child, he didn't falter or trip over his words spoken as the cult's bishop. Not only did he not hesitate, but he didn't even pause to think

about what he was saying. He acted as if there was some adult whispering exactly what to say to him.

“If that’s true, then he’s our biggest lead—”

There was a knock at the door just as Ebel took an interest in what Lauretta had said about the boy. Johanna poked her head into the room.

“Your Excellency, I have a message for you from Master Phoebe. The boy is awake.”

Everyone in the room immediately stood up.

Just Ebel and Rock headed to check on the bishop.

The Alexises still hadn’t recovered mentally yet, and no one knew what would happen when they saw the bishop again. Guido stayed behind, saying, “I’m not confident I won’t tear the brat’s face off.” And Michaela naturally stayed to keep her brother company.

Phoebe was waiting for them outside the room when they arrived.

“...You came?” He greeted them with a nebulous expression that was part wry smile and part frustrated scowl.

“Something happen?” Rock asked in a hushed voice. Her father jabbed his finger toward the door with a heavy sigh.

“See for yourself.”

The three of them entered the room together.

A lantern was lit inside, filling the space with a warm, orange light. The boy bishop was sitting up in bed, but he cowered when he saw them come in.

“Eek!”

He let out a scream of sheer terror.

How can he be so scared after all the suffering he’s put other people through? Rock was fuming on the inside, but Ebel addressed him kindly like the perfect gentleman he was.

“You’ve come to, Bishop? How do you feel?”

Instead of answering, the boy yanked the blanket up and over his head. They could see him shaking like a leaf in the wind underneath.

“Hey! Don’t hide,” Rock snapped, but Phoebe held out his hand to stop her from saying more.

Then he reached out and rubbed the boy’s blanket-covered back.

“Please explain to them what you just told me.”

Prompted by Phoebe, the boy fearfully poked his head out from under the covers.

Tears glistened in his red-brown eyes as he glanced around at the faces of the three people surrounding him.

It was hard to imagine he was the same Bishop. Rock was finally starting to have doubts as she compared this child to the young yet confident cult leader.

“U-Umm...” the boy uttered in a familiar voice. “I honestly...don’t, er, remember much about my time...*in the r-ruins...*”

“*You* don’t?!” Rock cried out, causing the boy to shrink back.

“U-Umm, I remember a l-little. I heard a voice the whole t-time and thought I would be safe if I did what it said... I a-also sorta remember being called ‘Bishop.’”

Did that mean even the bishop was being controlled by something too?

If that was true, then no one knew the truth about the mastermind behind everything.

“Can you tell us what you remember? Any small detail is fine,” Ebel requested, worry clearly showing on his face now that they may’ve lost any leads they had left.

The boy avoided meeting his eyes and said nothing, seeming just as confused.

“What’s your name? How long were you in the ruins for? Do you have a family?”

He seemed incapable of even answering the simplest of questions.

“You really don’t remember anything?” Disappointment took the wind right

out of Rock's sails. "What about when I punched your damn mask...?"

"'Damn'...?" The boy blinked. Then he suddenly gasped. "Damn..." He repeated that word like using it used to be a familiar habit before he looked up at her with a start. "That's right! I'm Kurt!"

"Kurt is your name?" Ebel asked, and Kurt nodded several times.

"Uh-huh. I wonder why I forgot even my own name..."

He placed his small hand on his freckled cheek and stared off into space for a long moment. Then he finally began talking a bit at a time.

"I just remembered. I picked up that *damn* mask while I was working in the fields."

Kurt started to talk about himself like the dam holding back his memories had begun to overflow. According to him, he was from one of the farming villages scattered outside the imperial capital. He'd lost his parents at an early age and was taken in by the mayor. He earned his keep by working in the fields, but then one day, something strange was unearthed from the fields—the white bishop mask.

Assuming it was an antique from a bygone era, the mayor proudly displayed it in his home like it was a family treasure.

"But I couldn't stop myself from constantly going to it..." All the color drained from Kurt's young face. His little hands were whiter than the sheets they clasped. "I think I tried it on out of curiosity. It was like I just *had* to one day..."

He hung his head, then gave it a hard shake, as if to shake off his fear.

"I don't remember much after that. The next thing I knew, I was surrounded by lots of people, and there was always this invisible voice giving me instructions. It told me everyone will live in peace and tranquility if we do as it says."

The mask had likely taken over his mind by that point. Or rather, the curse within the mask had.

"It appears you were being controlled by that mask," Ebel stated.

Kurt scrunched up his face, not understanding.

“Controlled? How? I don’t really get it...”

“To be honest, we don’t really understand how it works either. But given your actions up until the mask broke and your vague memories, that’s the only explanation,” Ebel flatly presented him with the truth.

And yet, Kurt still struggled to wrap his head around it. Bewildered, he looked at each face of the three adults in the room.

“Did I...do something bad?” he asked.

Rock looked away, unable to answer.

Even Ebel seemed momentarily at a loss for words.

Phoebe, the only one who seemed unfazed by the question, glanced at Rock, sighed, and answered the boy.

“Nah. We just took you out of a bad situation.”

Rock was extremely relieved by his answer.

“Your safety is guaranteed with us. It’s already late, so you can spend the night at ease here. I would like to speak with you a little more tomorrow and then I will send you home,” Ebel assured him in a soft voice, but what he said caused the boy’s face to fall.

“You...will...? All right.”

His dark expression seemed like it was due to something more than exhaustion. But the three adults exited the room without touching on it.



“**...DO** you believe him?” Phoebe asked Ebel in a hushed voice when they stepped into the hallway.

Ebel looked thoughtful as he answered, “I don’t think there’s any room for doubt right now.”

“It could all be an act. There’s a chance he’s a quick thinker.”

“Of course, I plan to keep an eye on him for a while.” Ebel met Phoebe’s counsel with a small smile. “But I’ve a greater hope that he will become a valuable source of information.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more.”

Rock watched Phoebe flash a similar cunning smile with an odd sense that things had changed between them. Her father seemed more relaxed around Ebel, and Ebel also seemed to respect his opinion.

Looking at them interact like this reminded her that Phoebe had stayed at Mateus Manor the entire time she was gone. As imprudent as it was, she was mighty curious to know how things had gone with them living together.

Shortly after sunset, they insisted Lord and Lady Alexis return to their own home. Part of that decision came from Ebel’s determination that they were unlikely to obtain any more useful information from them.

However, the Alexises seemed like they still weren’t done apologizing for everything. Placido, who looked particularly worn down, kneeled at Phoebe’s feet and bowed his head.

“I know I’ve committed an unpardonable crime by snatching away your precious daughter...!”

“Yeah, you definitely did.”

Phoebe seemed to struggle with how to react. Placido had taken his hand and held onto it with an iron grip, so Phoebe couldn’t shake him off even if he wanted to.

At his wits’ end, he looked to Rock for help.

“Uncle, please hear me out.” Rock stepped between them. “I believe it was due to the werewolf curse that you kidnapped me. We understand you weren’t fully in control when it happened.”

Rock would also struggle to answer if she was asked whether she could forgive them or not.

She was scared to death when they kidnapped her. Her father and Iniel were both involved in a horrible accident because of it. Every day wore away at her psyche as she longed to go home but couldn’t until it nearly pushed her to the brink of stupidly accepting the werewolf curse.

But she also understood that the kidnapping wasn’t entirely Placido and

Lauretta's fault.

It was a hard line to draw. Human desires are bottomless, and the werewolf curse amplifies them tenfold with reckless abandon. While their crimes could never be erased, both what drove them to it and their memories of it had vanished.

How should they condemn them for something so complicated and supernatural?

Rock didn't know the answer to that, so she made what she did know clear.

"I will *never* become your child. I have a father."

Phoebe quietly nodded along, and Placido and Lauretta stared at Rock in silence.

"But it is the undeniable truth that I am your niece," she stated, then continued with reservation, "So, if you ever need me to—if my presence will make you just a little happier—then I will be happy to visit as your niece next time."

After making that declaration and finally smiling ever so slightly, Rock turned toward Phoebe.

"I hope you'll allow my father to accompany me then."

"I have to go too?!" Phoebe cried out hysterically mid-nod. He probably didn't expect to get dragged into the conversation like that.

Catching Ebel cracking up out of the corner of her eye, Rock also placated her father with a laugh.

"You've got more recent stories about Mother, Father. I'm sure Auntie would love to hear about the good times."

"I mean...yeah, I guess..." Phoebe mumbled, sounding unusually unconfident. His blue eyes darted away from his daughter and in-laws.

Lauretta, her cheeks stained with dried tears, quietly walked up to him.

"Fredericks Berwick."

Phoebe jumped when he was called by his full name. He wasn't so rude as to

keep his eyes averted, but his whole face tensed.

Lauretta continued to address him regardless of the uncomfortable look he gave her.

“I’d always believed that you stole my sister from me. That my foolish sister betrayed me and my family because of your wicked seduction... I even convinced myself that you were at fault for her early death. I thought myself in the right for taking my niece—for taking Roxy back, by justifying everything that way.

“But Valencia...she left because she wanted to... Not because you seduced or tricked her. She left home and chose you because that’s what she truly wanted. I knew that...and yet, I was the true fool for seeing things through clouded eyes...!”

She stopped there and buried her face in her hands. Placido wordlessly rubbed her back.

Phoebe seemed even more lost for words, but after giving Rock another look, he settled with: “I’ve got plenty of stories about her.”

And then he offered her an awkward yet true smile.

“I hope you will let me visit with my daughter to talk about it someday.”

“...Please do. I would be honored if you would tell me about my little sister.”

Lauretta nodded, her face wet with tears.

She really does look like Mother, Rock thought, her heart aching as she watched her aunt and father interact.



AS the sun went down, everyone gradually left Mateus Manor.

Guido and Michaela left for home shortly after the Alexises and Danilo. There was nothing gloomy about their departure as the siblings boarded their carriage with a smile.

“Let me know if you find anything else out.”

“I’ll come right over with my brother when you send the word,” Michaela said

after Guido, then followed up her comment with a devilish grin. “Of course, we would be happy if you send word of good tidings as well—such as your engagement announcement.”

“PARDON?!” Rock squeaked.

“You will be the first to know.”

Ebel’s response was the definition of calm, directly contrasting Rock’s panic. A smile blossomed on Michaela’s lips when she heard, and Guido warmly took in his sister’s joy.

Around nightfall, the last visitor of the day appeared at Mateus Manor.

The doctor, a man held in high esteem for his skills within the imperial capital, grimaced after examining Krister and his busted leg.

“It looks like the leg was left unattended for quite a long time after the injury occurred. He’ll need to use a cane for the rest of his life.”

Rock was shocked by the news, but Krister looked like he’d already accepted that fact before being examined.

“I struck gold just by surviving my ordeal,” he said frankly with a wry grin.

It was such an oddly admirable thing to hear from the greedy man who used to put profit above all else.

“Did you ever think we would hear such a philosophical line from Krister, Roxy?” Phoebe remarked, shrugging with exasperation.

At any rate, it was also a fact that they’d safely rescued him. And since they had, there was one person Rock wanted to let know right away.

“I want to tell Nisha as soon as possible.”

Nisha was likely still waiting to this day for Krister to return to her in the slums. There was no way she’d give up after continually investing so much time and money in finding him. Rock was positive it’d make her day and year if she heard the good news.

“That’s a brilliant idea, Roxy.” Ebel clapped his hands together and happily suggested, “I’ll send a messenger out to invite her here first thing tomorrow

morning. Krister still needs more medical treatment, so it's best if she comes to him."

"You want to bring her *here*?" Phoebe looked around the fancy guest room Ebel was letting Krister rest in, worry edging into his features. "I sure hope she doesn't lose interest in you after getting invited to a nob's house."

"Nisha ain't that kinda girl. She's a much better human than me," Krister argued, taking Phoebe's joke seriously.

Rock found his reaction funny, so she decided to tease him a little more.

"You've gotta wonder why such a fine lady fell for somebody like you."

"Hey, you're one to talk, Rock, you're—" Krister stopped mid-argument as he realized an important fact. His eyes cruised Rock's figure. "Hold on, why're ya still wearing that?" he asked, confused.

Rock was still wearing the blue and gold embroidered dress Lady Alexis had prepared for her. Although she was covered in dust from everything that had happened at the ruins, no one would mistake Rock for a man right now.

"That's not all either..." Krister's gaze drifted to Ebel and Phoebe, who were standing on both sides of her. "Why are His Excellency, Phoebe, and even Lord and Lady Alexis calling you *Roxy*?"

Anyone who heard that name would think it belonged to a woman. Even if it sounded a little similar to the tailor living in the slums called Rock, no one would ever connect the two.

"Maybe Father rubbed off on me," Rock said with a laugh, deliberately not telling him the truth.

"My kid took after me in the weirdest ways," Phoebe added with a chuckle, which seemed to make Krister even less convinced.

"That part of you is definitely similar, but... Whatever. You're a weird family."

"But you won't find a closer family anywhere in the capital," Ebel added, sounding a little envious.



NIGHT wore on after they had all those separate conversations, and Rock and Phoebe decided to stay over at Mateus Manor. Everyone was exhausted from the long, chaotic day, and after what happened the last time they left, neither of them wanted to ride a carriage back to the slums in the middle of the night. Besides, Ebel had invited them to join him for dinner, so they happily took him up on his offer.

Rock also had some things she really wanted to ask about while she had the opportunity. Specifically, she wanted to know how things went between Ebel and her father while she wasn't around.

"Did my father behave while he was with you, Your Excellency?" Rock asked as soon as the three of them sat around the dinner table.

Ebel chuckled and Phoebe snorted.

"Hey, I behave wherever I go," he retorted.

"I didn't mean it like you have no manners. I'm pretty sure you were worried sick the whole time I was missing." Rock shrugged. "I'm just curious if you were being antsy wanting to rescue me before it was time."

"Well, I definitely wasn't calm," Phoebe said vaguely, glancing in Ebel's direction.

Meanwhile, Ebel was slowly savoring his bite of food, pretending like this topic didn't also include him. It was easy to guess something had happened, given the way they were both acting.

"Don't tell me you fought?"

Both men froze at her question before Phoebe answered.

"Us fight? Never! His Excellency and I are full-grown adults. We were perfectly calm throughout it all."

"Is that true, Your Excellency?" Rock asked Ebel to confirm what sounded awfully like a lie to her.

"Of course. Your father speaks the truth," Ebel responded with a genuine smile, further adding to Rock's suspicions that something had happened.

But they said nothing more after that, as if they were colluding to hide the

truth from her. Meanwhile, Johanna looked like she was itching to talk the whole time she served them dinner. Clearly, she was dying to tell Rock all about it.

After dinner, Rock offered to help Johanna clean up.

“Oh no, you needn’t trouble yourself, Master Rock...”

Johanna only refused Rock’s assistance once, however. She was quick to pull Rock into the kitchen and gave her dishes to wash.

Only the coachman Iniel was in the kitchen with the girls. He was still recovering from the injuries he’d sustained during Placido’s attack and had started to take on light jobs around the house that wouldn’t negatively affect his recovery.

“I’m so glad to see you are safe and well, Master Rock,” he said, looking truly relieved. “I’d never be able to face His Excellency again if anything happened to you.”

“Nothing would ever happen to her!” Johanna objected at once. “Master Rock has two heroes on her side, after all!”

“Heroes?” Rock asked with a smile, even though she’d guessed who Johanna was talking about.

“Yes, heroes! No enemy will be left standing if His Excellency and Master Phoebe join hands to take them down!” she proudly declared as if she were talking about herself.

Rock actually thought so too.

The heroes in question had already returned to their rooms for the night. They’d both told Rock they wanted to talk after dinner, but Rock turned them down and headed to the kitchen to hear Johanna’s account first.

After all, there were things only the maid would tell her.

Water was pumped from the well and placed in a washbasin where Johanna washed the dishes. Iniel was responsible for rinsing the dishes, and Rock was responsible for drying them with a towel.

“Johanna, how was my father while I wasn’t here?” Rock asked while they

worked.

“He was, well...in a frenzied, irritated panic,” Johanna replied over the sound of bubbles popping in the washbasin as she scrubbed the dishes with a sponge.

“That he was,” Iniel nodded in affirmation. “That night, I was injured, and Master Phoebe carried me all the way back here. After he spurred one of the horses back to the manor with me, he explained the situation to His Excellency in a tizzy. His Excellency jumped into action and raced to the scene of the attack...”

Iniel sadly cast down his gaze.

“...But there, he only found the wrecked carriage and the other horse that was obediently waiting to be brought home. He couldn’t track you by smell because the other werewolf had escaped by jumping from point to point.”

Placido did an excellent job of hiding his trail. Thanks to that, Rock’s whereabouts were a mystery, leaving her truly helpless and alone until the Linus siblings visited Alexis Manor.

“His Excellency and Master Phoebe knew that the kidnapping was the Alexis family’s doing, but—”

“They couldn’t recklessly charge in!” Johanna enthusiastically finished Iniel’s sentence. “And that’s when they violently went at it!”

“V-Violently?!”

Rock was horrified by what that word implied.

Were Ebel and Phoebe really at such odds with each other? What kind of bloody confrontation did they have?

Rock’s horror was minimized by Johanna’s big, excited nod.

“Quite! His Excellency insisted they prepare and wait for the opportune moment, since it was hard to get a feel for the other side. Meanwhile, Phoebe exhorted that they should rush in and save you, since your safety mattered above all else. They were in direct conflict, leading to many fierce quarrels. His Excellency used his very own body to obstruct Phoebe from storming out of the house more than once!”

Rock felt the blood drain from her face—quite the opposite of Johanna, whose cheeks were flushed over the excitement of it all.

She understood that Ebel and Phoebe both had their own ways of caring and worrying about her. But one wrong move likely would've led to an irreparable crack in their relationship.

Rock's hands grew clammy as she thought about her absence being another trigger for disaster within Mateus Manor.

"So, uh, did Father and His Excellency make up?" Rock asked, not sure if that was the right way to phrase it.

On one side of her, Iniel looked like he was trying to suppress his laughter, while Johanna grew unusually serious on the other side.

"Of course they did! They are full-grown adults after all."

"I see...but weren't they quarreling a lot?"

"They were!" Johanna chirped without a moment's delay, her hands no longer scrubbing the dishes. Her eyes sparkled with excitement, despite Rock shuddering from the thought of it.

"Why are *you* so happy?"

Johanna's enthusiasm was only further stoked by Iniel's dry question.

"Because! I was a witness for their dramatic reconciliation!!!" Water splashed everywhere when she thrust her fists into the air. "Master Phoebe struggled to shake His Excellency off when he gallantly grabbed him, putting his own body at risk. Enraged, Master Phoebe raised his fists, but His Excellency chose not to dodge, instead accepting the blow to his wrists!"

"I-It turned into a brawl...?"

"No! His Excellency emphatically yet patiently tried to persuade Master Phoebe with his words!" Johanna grew even more animated as she reached what seemed to be her favorite part of the story. "I understand why. His Excellency lost his father while he was young. I believe he sometimes sees his father in Master Phoebe... He felt the same way as Master Phoebe but tried to persuade him not to be rash. He trusts him."

“His Excellency did that...”

Rock also understood that about him.

Ebel occasionally said things that made him sound envious of her relationship with her father. It was easy to understand why he wanted what they had, considering what he'd lost.

Phoebe also should've known that.

“His Excellency's feelings definitely reached Master Phoebe!” Tears formed in Johanna's eyes. “And then, at long last, Master Phoebe said he'd entrust everything concerning this case to His Excellency... He promised to bitterly wait for the right opportunity to save Master Rock! They shared a passionate look and a firm handshake. I saw it with my own eyes!”

“I see...”

Rock was relieved.

She couldn't say she was happy about the overall situation, but she felt she should still be glad that the relationship between them had been repaired.

Or maybe it was better to say that their relationship had improved and grown stronger rather than just repaired.

Rock was impressed all over again by Ebel's calmness and her father's magnanimity.

“It's probably imprudent for me to say this, but...” Rock started as she wiped down each dish she was handed. “I'm okay with everything that's happened if it resulted in His Excellency and my father coming to trust each other.”

Rock had met her aunt and uncle, and they were able to form a relationship through all the pain and hurt they caused each other.

There were definite losses. There were a mountain of unsolvable mysteries and yet-to-be-settled circumstances.

But they'd definitely gained some things along the way.

“I believe we might actually be making some real progress,” Rock quietly finished.

“We have,” Johanna agreed. “This time, it might have just been a small win, but a win is still a win! We absolutely didn’t lose!”

“You’re right, Johanna.”

Although some things were lost, Rock was able to return to the people she loved and gained much more in the process.

Maybe someday, they would be able to bring back an even greater happiness.

“But I still can’t believe Father raised a hand against His Excellency...”

Rock snickered despite herself.

Her father often accepted any fight someone brought to him, but he was rarely the instigator. It was just like her father to choose a nobleman as the one person he personally picked a fight with.

“I don’t mean to correct you, Master Rock, but that is the way in which all gentlemen forge friendship!” Johanna said in a singsong voice.

“Really?” Rock asked, curious.

“Master Rock, please ignore her,” Iniel appealed with a sigh. “You’re going to get her started rambling about her fantasies again.”

Apparently, Johanna didn’t hear him. She completely stopped washing the dishes and stared into the distance like she was daydreaming.

“If I may join you in being imprudent, seeing them fight was honestly the best thing ever... The trust that forms from clashing, a slowly changing dynamic—those are some of my absolute favorite story beats!”

“Story beats?”

“Please ignore her! I implore you!”

Johanna entered her own little world despite Rock’s dubious look and Iniel’s pleas. But then she seemed to abruptly snap out of it and whirled toward Rock in a panic.

“Oh, please don’t misunderstand! I fully support your romance with His Excellency, Master Rock!”

“What? Wh-Where did *that* come from?”

“I’ll admit I did temporarily fantasize about how great of a pairing they’d make, but it’s too immoral! It’s an undeniable fact that His Excellency is madly in love with you, and Master Phoebe treasures his beloved daughter above all else. I’ll just have to enjoy shipping them in my own fantasy world, so please rest assured that you can stay by His Excellency’s side without your father getting between you! Please let him stay with you!”

Rock couldn’t understand half of what Johanna was trying to say. But she saw Iniel holding his head like he just wanted it to end, so she played along with it for the time being.

“Yeah...I’m fine with that.”

“Thank you!” Johanna cheered, bowing with heartfelt gratitude that was lost on Rock.



ROCK ended up staying in the kitchen much longer than intended. Most of the time was spent talking, but after somehow finishing the dishes, she returned to her guest room after midnight.

She peeked into the next room to confirm her father was asleep before crawling into bed alone. She was more exhausted than she thought as she fell asleep almost as soon as her head hit the fluffy down pillow.

When she woke up the next morning, Ebel was sleeping beside her.

He was in the same bed, under the same sheets, his burnt sienna eyelashes fluttering as he lay there peacefully asleep.

“Wh-Wh-Whaaaaa?!”



Sure, Johanna had pleaded with her the prior night to let Ebel “stay by her side.” But she didn’t expect that’d entail waking up with him in the same bed. She was positive she’d crawled into bed alone, so why was he there? Her sleep-dazed mind snapped awake at once.

“Ebel... Ebel!”

She frantically shook him until he squinted up at her like she was the brightest light in the world. A soft, lazy smile spread across his face when he registered she was really there next to him.

“Good morning, Roxy.”

“Good morning— Hey! This isn’t the time for greetings! Why are you in my bed?!”

Contrary to Rock’s panic, he was as laidback as could be. His eyes fluttered shut as if he might fall back to sleep again, and he answered her by moving only his lips and nothing else.

“I just couldn’t fall asleep last night, so I visited your room. You were already sound asleep, so I laid down just to enjoy the sight of your sleeping face...when I accidentally fell asleep myself.”

He boldly said something that made Rock tremble with anger.

It didn’t matter *how* much she loved Ebel; she still wasn’t happy to have him or anyone coming into her room while she was completely zonked out and too tired to wake up. It wasn’t that she didn’t trust him; she was just embarrassed. She had no idea what she looked like asleep.

And not only did he watch her, but he even spent the night in bed with her! She had every right to be flustered.

“B-But you didn’t have to get under the sheets with—”

Rock’s objection was silenced by Ebel reaching out and pulling her to his chest. He sleepily whispered into her ear under the warm blanket wrapped around both of them.

“I wanted to personally confirm you were safe and still here with me. We were separated for a painfully long time.”

Rock couldn't complain when he hugged her like that.

It was a fact they'd been apart for a long time, and she'd terribly missed his warmth. Even though they hadn't hugged like this much, she felt a mysterious sense of security in his arms as her heart raced. She wanted to stay with him like this forever.

"I'm sorry for worrying you," she whispered into his muscular chest.

"I was worried. But it's all good now," he responded right above her head.

"But—"

"I'm content now, Roxy. Everything is all right as long as I have you."

Rock lifted her face from his chest. Ebel was smiling down at her with just one eye cracked open. His face slowly drew closer and passionately captured her lips before his head fell back on the pillow, and he drifted off to sleep.

"...Ebel," she whispered with lips still warmed from his kiss.

She reined in her racing heartbeat and shut her eyes. She wasn't going to leave Ebel's embrace anytime soon. She wanted to stay a little longer so he could get a good night's rest.

They remained quietly in bed together until the faint morning light grew much brighter.



THAT morning, a single carriage left Mateus Manor with a message. It was, of course, headed to retrieve Nisha and returned successfully from its mission just before noon.

Rock went out to the front garden to welcome their guest.

Nisha anxiously poked her head out of the carriage and placed one unsure foot on the ground after the other, as if she'd never stepped out of one before. But all her apprehension shifted into a relieved smile when she saw Rock waiting for her.

"Rock... Is it true? You found Krister?"

"Yeah, he's inside," Rock told her, then hesitantly explained, "But...you should

know...he's hurt."

"He's hurt?!"

"Yeah. His leg was broken when he got kidnapped."

Nisha's whole face tensed. Rock held out her hand to her.

"I'll show you to his room. Come with me."

"...Okay."

Nisha's hand was shaking.

Rock tightly held it, and they sprinted to the guest room where Krister was waiting.

Krister was lying in bed when they entered the room.

He was still debilitated in addition to his bum leg, so the doctor said he should start by resting and regaining his strength before anything else.

He wasn't supposed to have visitors for long today because it might overexcite and exhaust him. Rock explained the situation to Nisha as they raced through the hallway, and she agreed to stay calm.

But she forgot all about that as soon as she saw Krister.

"Krister!" Nisha cried out as she ran and threw herself on him on top of the bed.

Krister tried to catch her, but he could only raise his arms so high. Still, he was able to pat her on the head as she clung to his waist, weeping.

"Sorry for leaving you alone so long, Nisha."

"I don't care about that! I-I thought I'd never get to see you again...!" She sobbed like a small child. "I knew you wouldn't abandon me! So, I was certain something bad had happened to you...!"

"Thanks. Rock told me you put up posters."

This was Rock's first time ever seeing such a gentle smile on Krister's greedy face.

Everyone must have at least one person they can be their true self with and

show unfettered affection to, she thought.

“We should give them some alone time,” Ebel whispered to Rock as they stood in the room watching the heartwarming reunion.

“...Yeah, we should.”

Rock was all for that plan and quietly exited into the hallway with Ebel.

They could still hear Nisha crying on the other side of the door for a long while after that.

Rock and Ebel leaned against the hallway wall and remained silent for a few minutes. They were glad to see the lovers reunited, but the circumstances prevented them from truly being happy.

“What will happen to Krister now?” Rock asked in a quiet voice, finally breaking the silence.

Ebel looked at his folded hands and sighed.

“I’ll let him stay here for a while until he gets used to using a cane.”

“Won’t that be a burden on you?” Rock asked frankly, getting a chuckle out of Ebel.

“It’s not that much trouble to look after him. I’ve got plenty of rooms to lend one out, and I can get him the best doctor if he stays in the aristocrat district.”

Was it the noble thing to do not to bring up how much of a financial burden that would be? Rock was impressed by him once again.

“Besides, I want a little more information,” Ebel continued, his brow creasing. “Krister’s probably still confused by it all, but I’m hoping he’ll remember something after he’s had a chance to calm down. I’m betting on it.”

“Yeah, I hope he remembers something too.”

Krister and Kurt—they had two living witnesses under Ebel’s roof.

Rock wasn’t physically harmed, but it was a traumatic experience nevertheless. She wanted something to show for the pain she’d put herself through.

“This sect of the Werewolf Brotherhood seemed relatively new,” Ebel began

as he slowly started dissecting the situation. “I’m not sure how they got started, but it might be hard to learn the origins of the curse from them if they were only mimicking the original Brotherhood. But we should be able to come closer to the truth if we can figure out who’s been controlling them.”

The power of the werewolves unnecessarily exacerbates human desire, compelling them to act on their violent impulses.

If nothing else, they learned through this last ordeal that there was something—or someone—who tried to manipulate people that hadn’t been cursed as well. They might be able to learn the truth of the curse if they could find the mastermind behind it.

Ebel and Rock wanted the same thing: to make it so no one else had to suffer and grieve because of the werewolf curse. And to do that, they needed to solve the mystery surrounding it.

But before that—

“Father and I are planning to go back home soon,” Rock softly told Ebel. “The shop has been closed this whole time, and I’d rather not deal with thieves thinking my stuff is free for the taking.”

Too much time had passed since she left her little shop in the slums. So much so that she was starting to miss that squalid shantytown.

There was no greater happiness than being able to choose when and where you return home.

“...I see. I’ll miss you.” An even greater sadness showed on his face than his words let on.

“Please don’t look like this is goodbye forever.” Rock laughed, and Ebel shrugged like a pouting child.

“It feels the same. I can’t believe I have to let go of you again after overcoming a long, arduous wait to finally reunite with you...”

“You can see me anytime you want. I’ll always be waiting for you in my shop,” Rock said to soothe and comfort him.

Now that she was free, she could wait for him in her shop. She could even

impatiently wait for his visit and welcome him with a bright smile at the door when the chime rang. Or she could go to him if she wanted. The choice was hers.

So there was no need to mourn saying goodbye here.

“That reminds me, I haven’t finished the court uniform you ordered.”

“Oh, right! I forgot about that.”

“I’ll finish it before your next visit. So please be sure to stop by soon,” she instructed, emphasizing the soon part.

“I’ll be there very soon,” Ebel immediately responded. “I want to see you.”

He stroked her cheek with the back of his hand, as if he wanted to burn every contour of her face into his memory. Rock shyly laughed as his touch tickled her.

“To tell you the truth, I’m struggling a bit to leave you.”

“Just a bit? It’s a great big struggle for me to be apart from you.”

“No...it’s a big struggle for me too...”

“I want to be with you every day if possible. Like we were this morning.”

Ebel just *had* to go and mention what happened that morning, forcing her to glare at him to conceal the blush she felt creeping up on her cheeks.

“You startled me. I can’t believe you’d do that without asking—”

“Can I do it if I *ask*?” Ebel quickly interjected, his smile not leaving his lips. His golden eyes were dangerously serious as they captured Rock in their unwavering gaze.

“I-I didn’t mean it like that!”

“Very well. I’ll be sure to ask you the night before next time.”

“Ebel! Are you even listening to me?!”

Flustered by how calmly he turned her comment into something convenient for him, Rock grabbed his hands.

Before anything else could happen, the door next to them opened.

“What’s going on out here?” Nisha eyed them curiously as she stepped out of the guest room.

Rock promptly let go of Ebel and looked away. “N-Nothing... Are you done talking to Krister?”

“Yeah. I don’t want to get in the way of his recovery by staying too long.”

Nisha’s eyes were red and puffy, but her expression was sunny. It was easy to see that a weight had left her.

“We plan to take our time talking after he feels a little better.” Nisha smiled and bowed to Rock and Ebel. “Thank you so very much, Rock. You too, Mr. Count.”

“You should refer to him as Your Excellency or Count Mateus, Nisha,” Rock corrected.

“I don’t mind,” Ebel laughed.

Nisha didn’t seem to care either way as she sidled up to Rock like she was never interrupted.

“I feel especially indebted to Rock.”

She laced her soft fingers with Rock’s calloused ones. She leaned in extra close when Rock looked down at their hands.

“Say...how about I pay you back by spending the night with you? We can keep it our little secret,” she whispered seductively, pulling Rock’s hand into her soft bosom. “This is the *only* way I can thank you for everything... Interested?”

“...Huh?”

Ebel angrily pulled their hands apart while Rock was still too stunned to process what was going on.

“We don’t need you to pay us back for anything. I think you’re done here. I’ll call for the carriage.”

His frigid smile definitely didn’t reach his eyes. By the time Rock realized that fact, Nisha was doubled over laughing.

“I’m just kidding! Rock’s got herself a count! And she’s a girl.”

“What?!”

Rock instantly understood what she was saying this time.

But this was probably the first time someone realized she was a woman so quick. Even Ebel was initially skeptical, which was why he’d tried to sound her out for so long.

Rock’s whole body tensed as she timidly asked, “...When did you figure it out?”

“The first time I held your hand.”

That happened the first day they met at Justia’s bakery. Nisha wasn’t as panicked the initial week or two after she’d lost contact with Krister. Still, she wanted information badly enough to put the moves on Rock, and their hands definitely came in contact then.

“I often touch hands for my job.”

Nisha’s fingertips traced Rock’s hand.

While Rock had calloused hands, her knuckles were inconspicuous, and her fingers were slender with small, filed nails. The back of her hands were soft and curved and not as sinewy as a man’s.

“See? They’re completely different. I could tell that Rock Floria was a woman the moment I touched you.”

“Ugh...”

Rock lost her peace of mind knowing that.

There wasn’t anything to fear having that truth revealed here. Ebel long since knew the truth, and they just had to prevent Nisha from spreading the information.

But what if someone else saw through her the same way?

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Rock asked.

“I didn’t really have a reason to,” Nisha replied cheerfully. “There’s nothing to gain from exposing a girl who’s chosen to live as a man.”

“I always thought I pulled it off so well...”

“Don’t worry. I’ll continue to protect your secret.” Nisha squeezed her hand then pushed it toward Ebel. “Also, I really *was* joking just now! I mean, I have more than a few female clients, but I hate to make Mr. Count here jealous.”

“...Thank you for thinking of me,” Ebel said moodily, lacing his fingers with Rock’s.

Holding his hand made Rock’s heart skip a beat, rendering her speechless after that.

Later on, when she was alone, Rock stared at her hand.

No one had ever pointed out the difference to her before, and she didn’t notice it herself either. But Nisha was right—her hand *was* different from Ebel’s and Phoebe’s. She was surprised she didn’t realize that until today.

“Is it becoming harder to pose as a twenty-year-old man...?” Rock muttered to herself, then smiled bitterly.

Perhaps it was becoming time to close the curtain on the weak “trickster tailor.”

Although it was still vague at this point, she was starting to get that feeling.



IT’D been ten days since she left the slums.

After stopping by the store to make sure nothing was stolen, Rock headed straight to see Justia.

As she approached the bakery under the public bathhouse, the smell of delicious, freshly baked bread drifted out to meet her.

When she stopped to appreciate that nostalgic fragrance, the person in front of the store also paused with a start.

“ROCK!” Justia cried out, tossing her broom aside to rush out to meet Rock in the road.

Cargus poked his head outside, his eyes widening when he saw her.

“Hi, guys—”

Before Rock could finish her awkward greeting, Justia threw her arms around

her.

“For heaven’s sake! You *always* make me worry! Where have you been?!”

“Whoa! Sorry! I’m sorry!”

“You think sorry fixes things? You foolish child! I was worried sick thinking they’d gotten to you too!”

Crying, Justia pounded her fists into Rock’s back.

As Rock struggled to find the right way to appease her, she saw Cargus’s wry yet relieved smile over his wife’s shoulder.

Apparently, she really had caused them both to worry about her.

“I went looking for Krister,” Rock explained, earning a teary scowl from the baker’s wife.

“You were putting yourself in danger again?”

“I-I wouldn’t call it dangerous. Phoebe was with me.”

Justia would surely be enraged and give her a real earful if she told her the whole story. She definitely couldn’t tell her.

Of course, she understood all the scolding came from Justia genuinely caring about her.

“Speaking of Phoebe, where is she? You came back together, right?”

“Yeah. She said she’ll come after she gets dressed.”

It had been ten days since Phoebe came back home too. He said he had a ton of things he wanted to tend to. They agreed to meet up at the hash house for potato bread after they both finished the things they wanted to see to first.

Rock was hard-pressed apologizing and explaining herself to Cargus and Justia until Phoebe showed up.

They’d sat her down in a corner of the bakery and drilled her with questions. What’d happened to Krister? Where was he, and what was he up to now? And how were Rock and Phoebe involved in the search for him?

She was stuck walking a thin line between telling them the gist of things and

blurring the truth.

“Krister was kidnapped by a shady group and put through some pretty terrible stuff. Phoebe and I just so happened to come across their hideout...”

“How?”

“B-Because someone else was checking it out...”

Justia’s question had thrown her off, but she was able to come up with a quick save.

“Krister is injured,” she swiftly mentioned to distract the other woman from asking more questions she couldn’t answer. “He’ll survive, but he needs time to recover before he can come home, and he’ll be stuck using a cane for life.”

Justia and Cargus’s concern instantly switched to him.

“I see... It sounds like he went through a lot.”

“But even he said, ‘I struck gold just surviving my ordeal.’ Nisha was overjoyed when I told her how he took it.”

Krister should be returning to the slums soon too. Maybe they’d spot him walking through the shantytown using a cane while Nisha supported him on the other side.

“Well, now Nisha can finally collect on all the money she used for those posters.”

Contrary to her word choice, Justia was smiling, the dark shadows finally lifting from her worried face.

Phoebe, now changed into his favorite attire, walked into the hash house just then. His chestnut tresses cascaded down his back, his beautiful face was powdered and highlighted by makeup, and he wore a blue dress Rock had tailored for him.

He spotted Rock as soon as she waved, and his rouged lips broke into a sweet smile.

When he dressed like this, he really did look like a big-boned beauty.

“Phoebe, I just heard all about your big adventure with Rock,” Justia called

out to him, sounding a little exasperated.

Phoebe playfully winked at her.

“You need a good adventure every once in a while to stave off boredom.”

“You can adventure all you want with *your* skills but try not to drag Rock into too much danger. This kid is so weak, you could snap him like a twig,” Justia warned, then returned to the kitchen with Cargus.

Phoebe sat in the chair across from Rock and shrugged.

“It was quite the *big adventure* this time, huh?” He swept his thick, luxurious hair off his shoulders. “But we both got home safe and sound. His Excellency doesn’t have any dresses in my size on hand yet, so I’m thrilled to finally be back in my second skin.”

“You look beautiful,” Rock complimented him from the bottom of her heart.

Rock loved both Phoebe, who dressed and lived as a woman, and Fredericks Berwick, who did the opposite. She loved that her father didn’t have to give up either side of himself.

“Living in that mansion in pants for days on end almost made me forget how much I love this look, too,” Phoebe said jokingly.

Rock had already learned all about how he spent those ten days from Johanna. She giggled as she recalled her stories and Phoebe arched a suspicious eyebrow.

“What’s so funny?”

“I was just thinking how much I would’ve loved to see what things were like between you and His Excellency.”

“...Grr. That little rat. She’s such a blabbermouth.” Phoebe clicked his tongue, then cracked a wry smile. “You sound awfully optimistic for someone who got kidnapped.”

“Yeah, I guess I do...”

Rock was undeniably violently kidnapped and forced to live days on end with no peace of mind. The air of tension and volatility she experienced at Alexis

Manor was still fresh in her mind too.

But she had a feeling that even those miserable days might become a different kind of memory with time.

Maybe she would feel differently about her aunt and uncle when she looked back on that time someday in the future. There was still much she couldn't get over yet, but she hoped she could forgive them eventually. And hopefully, when that time came, she could speak with them without being scared. She really wanted to hear more about her mother.

"Anyway, let's enjoy some of the potato bread that we haven't had in days!" Rock exclaimed, the smell of the bakery making her nostalgic. She raised her hand and called out to the kitchen, "Justia! Can we get some bread?!"

"Sure thing!" Justia answered from the kitchen. Then she turned around as if she just remembered something important. "Oh yeah, Rock! Have you been by to see Lady Trilian yet?"

"What? No, I haven't..."

"She seemed super ticked off that you hadn't been around in days and started wondering if you were skipping rent. She went around grumbling that she's going to jack up the rent, so you'd better go speak with her."

Now that she thought about it, Rock had been staying with Phoebe ever since Krister first showed up in front of her apartment. It really had been a long time since she actually went back to her own place, so it made sense her landlady would worry.

"How ticked was she?" Rock asked, fearful of the answer.

"Do you think that woman's capable of *quiet* anger?" Justia laughed. "It's so bad, she was going around complaining that her tenant fled in the night. I'd prepare for the worst."

"I was planning on moving out soon too..."

It seemed unlikely she'd be allowed to move out in peace with her landlady so upset.

Holding her head in her hand, Rock glanced at Phoebe.

“...Will you come with me to talk to her?”

Phoebe graced her with a benevolent smile.

“I can’t send you into that fox den alone. Shall we go get our heads chewed off together?”

Thus, Rock and Phoebe headed to the battlefield together after they finished eating.

Negotiations with Lady Trilian, who was already armed and ready, weren’t pretty, but Rock laid out a sound argument, Phoebe occasionally made matters worse, but eventually, they arrived at a deal both sides could agree to.

In the end, they won the right to move out comfortably in exchange for two months’ rent.



AROUND the time father and daughter finally started their happy life together, Rock finished tailoring the court uniform Ebel had ordered.

She promptly sent him a letter, and he arrived at the shop the same day.

“It’s been a while since you last came as a customer,” Rock said, greeting him when he came through the door.

He approached the counter, looking relieved.

“I’m thrilled to see your days have gone back to being peaceful.”

“All thanks to you, Ebel,” she promptly responded. Phoebe started clearing his throat as he swept the floors. She laughed and amended her statement. “Father too... Also, Lord Linus and Michaela helped out as well. I haven’t forgotten what Johanna and the others did either.”

Rock’s current tranquility existed with the help of many people.

They were able to recover what they thought they’d lost forever.

The Linus siblings were also spending their days in harmony together.

Johanna’s cheerfulness was still probably making life at Mateus Manor that much more fun and full of both dry and happy laughter.

Krister was due to return to the slums soon too.

And most of all...

"I hope your days are just as peaceful," Rock said.

Looking at her with fondness, Ebel reached across the counter and took her hand.

"Your presence is my peace of mind, Roxy."

Rock fidgeted bashfully from the feeling of his big, warm hand holding hers.

"Ebel..."

"If possible, I hope to have you closer all the time." Ebel gazed straight into Rock's eyes, completely undisturbed by Phoebe watching them. "As we discussed before, it is my greatest wish to spend my future with you."

Rock had long since made up her mind about that. But it was a lot harder for her to ignore Phoebe's presence.

And there was something else that'd been on her mind all this time: the dream her father and mother had worked toward. And her own slender hand resting in Ebel's.

So she answered him truthfully.

"That's my wish too, Ebel," she said and confided, "I've been thinking about the future a lot lately."

"...Oh? What do you have in mind?"

She hesitated for a moment. But a second's pause didn't change her mind. This was her dream, after all.

"I want to open up a shop as Roxy, not Rock," she said sheepishly.

Ebel quietly nodded, accepting her dreams fully.

Rock nodded back to him and continued, "I want to leave these slums with Father and open up a tailor shop in the imperial capital. That's what I've been thinking about."

She glanced to her left and saw Phoebe silently smiling at her too.

That'd been her father and mother's dream. And now it was hers.

"That is a lovely objective," Ebel said as enthusiastically as if it were his own dream. "I'm sure there are things I can assist you with in accomplishing your dreams. Please tell me when the time comes."

"Thank you very much, Ebel."

Truth be told, she might really need his help to make her dreams come true.

Rock was twenty—she knew the cold, hard truth about reality. She'd a general idea about the huge sum of money necessary to buy her way out of the slums and that some things couldn't just be solved with money alone.

But she would think about how to solve each obstacle as she came to it.

She wanted to obtain citizenship with her own two small, calloused hands.

She wanted to become a version of herself that could be confident standing at Ebel's side.

"I hope you will continue to be a regular customer of mine," she told Ebel. "I will reward your trust by putting my whole heart into every piece I tailor for you."

She squeezed his hand, and he put his other hand on top, encompassing it.

"Your determination has touched my heart. I'll become the best customer you've ever had."

"Never let go of that hand, you hear?" Phoebe coolly interjected, his eyes on their hands.

Which one was he saying that to? Either way, their aspirations and determination remained unchanged.

They would never let go until the day their dreams came true.

Of course, even after that, Roxy's small hand wasn't going to let go of Ebel's either.



Afterword

THANK you for joining me for the second volume of *The Werewolf Count and the Trickster Tailor*. I'm the author, Yuruka Morisaki.

I'm delighted you decided to continue Rock and Ebel's story with me.

After becoming a couple at the end of Volume 1, Rock and Ebel get to show off their intimate relationship throughout Volume 2. Of course, they run into all sorts of trouble, but I hope you enjoyed how they overcame their problems differently from the first volume because of the trust they now put in each other.

The people in their lives continue to be the same while changing in small ways: Phoebe has started exploring his two gender identities, Guido and Michaela are coming to accept the curse, and Johanna has awakened to a new fetish (?). In this way, everyone has started down their respective paths. Volume 2 introduced some new characters as well, and I hope you will come back to see where the future takes them.

And, of course, I hope to deliver Rock and Ebel's happy ending into your hands next time!



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Oh, crud, I just realized that I've been reincarnated into my favorite manga as the first boss defeated by the heroine at the start of the story!



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