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Annie said, "Lucy, these two are weird. They were never the type to go out and look for love, or even something with no strings attached. They filled up a lot of time with combat, travelling, hiking and all those adventurous kinds of things, you know? But I get that you don't buy it. I didn't either. It just felt like he was lying to my face."

"I know, right?!" Lucianne exclaimed at her understanding.

Annie continued, "I mean, one can hardly count the number of people after a Duke, let alone a King!"

Xandar spoke next, "And that's where our conversation should end. Thanks, An--"

Before he could say goodbye and hang up, Lucianne snatched his phone and covered his mouth with her small hand as she continued speaking to Annie, "And did you know what Xandar was trying to do? He came up with this imaginary number of men after me, and kept getting angered over people whom I've never even been with!"

Xandar tried taking his phone from her but not before Annie's voice chimed through the speaker again, "I don't think those are imaginary, Lucy."

Xandar stopped his efforts as he waited. And Lucianne suddenly felt like she was about to be betrayed by Annie. The Duchess continued, "When we went to the cafe the other day, many eyes were on you, and it wasn't because you're Queen. There was no look of recognition in their eyes, just alluring glances and yearning smirks. So, Xandar's anger is quite justified if you think about it."

Xandar's insecurity returned strong, and he pressed Lucianne's body tightly against his again as he started kissing Lucianne's hand that was still covering his mouth. When she was retracting it, he groaned and placed her hand back over his lips and started sucking on it.

His grip was too strong so Lucianne gave up trying to take back her hand as she narrowed her eyes at the phone, "Seriously, Annie? Even if that were true, did you really have to go into such detail?"

Christian's soft chuckle came from the other end before Annie said, "Well, I haven't told Christian this either with everything that just happened so I was thinking hm... I could just tell him now when I talk to you."

"Probably not the best plan, Annie." Lucianne retorted.

Xandar stopped his assault on her hand for a moment to say, "I disagree. But it's not like I didn't already know that. We went out twice already after all. I'd be blind to not see those bastards looking at you like I wasn't right next to you."

Annie exclaimed, "Really?! Wow! Even a King can't project enough fear to stop those eyes. I'm starting to see why Christian used to have a problem with that."

"Correction, my Duchess. I'm still having a problem with that. Why do you think I prefer ordering

take-outs rather than dine-in?"

Lucianne scoffed not-so-subtly. Annie then said in mock annoyance, "What is it with these cousins? It's not like we'll leave them. If anything, they're m--"

"They're more likely to leave us! Yes! I'm completely with you mmph—" Lucianne only completed Annie's sentence midway when Xandar's lips trapped her in a deep kiss that sent her into a slight daze. The sparks were intense. The sensation spread from her heart and channeled throughout her entire body. It made her doubt her doubts about Xandar, and her body inched closer to her mate, yearning to close whatever distance left between them.

When their lips parted, Xandar said in a low, firm tone, "Now, that's a lie."

Christian joined in, "Calling it a lie is putting it too lightly! It's total bullsh*t! Neither of us had past lovers. There was never anyone else for us. You two ladies, on the other hand, had someone like that. Plus, one of the things you both have in common is that frustratingly long line of admirers who all look like they're just waiting for us to screw up so they'll get a chance to steal you away from us!"

It was the first time Lucianne heard Christian sounding so scared and vulnerable, the very same emotions she saw behind Xandar's partially onyx orbs.

Lucianne, whose eyes remained locked with Xandar's, asked, "Annie, any tips on how I can get out of this? I've tried everything I know but I clearly don't know enough. I keep telling Xandar that I'm only with him but I'm not sure if that's working for me anymore. Got anything stronger I can use?"

Annie sighed. "If you do, let me know."

"Annie, you've been married for seventeen years. There must be something you say to calm your mate."

Annie sighed. "Yeah, momentarily. What I learned is that his jealousy doesn't really go away. You can put the angry beast to sleep but..."

"But the beast won't sleep forever." Lucianne completed her sentence and chuckled as she leaned into Xandar's hard chest to listen to his heartbeat as she uttered, "Well, it's a good thing too, I guess. At least we know they don't see anyone else."

Both Xandar and Christian can be heard scoffing, and there was a moment of silence before Xandar pecked a kiss on Lucianne's forehead, his eyes already returned to its original lilac color as he gazed at her in pure bliss.

Annie's voice then broke through the silence, "Lucy, Xandar told Christian you read a lot. If you find anything to calm these two Lycan men, please let me know. Preferably something that makes them magically see that us leaving them is downright ridiculous."

Before either cousin could speak, Lucianne exclaimed, "Will do, Annie!"

"C-Cuz, what just happened?" Christian asked like he was just brought out of a daze.

Xandar sighed, "Our Queen trapped me in her eyes so I couldn't focus or respond on time."

Christian agreed, "Same here with my Duchess. Dangerous creatures, aren't they?" Despite his

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choice of words, his voice only echoed love, affection and devotion.

Xandar pecked a kiss on Lucianne's temple before he uttered in agreement, "Dangerous at its highest degree."



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After saying their goodbyes and hanging up on the Duke and Duchess, Xandar's arms circled his mate's body as she snuggled in his chest. Lucianne's phone vibrated again. Xandar inhaled her scent from her hair as she removed the 'Get ready for dinner' reminder from her notifications bar.

Xandar chuckled at her cute habit and suggested, "How about we just call room service and spend some quiet time together tonight, my love?"

Her affectionate black orbs met his lilac ones as she pecked a kiss on his lips before whispering, "I'd like that."

Xandar beamed, and with his arm still around Lucianne's waist, he picked up the receiver from the table next to him and ordered steak for his mate and spaghetti for himself. They enjoyed each other's touch and scents while they waited.

Lucianne was getting addicted to the rhythm of Xandar's heartbeat. It was the most comforting and assuring sound she'd ever heard. It made her feel safe, and it made her feel loved. Xandar's eyes were closed the whole time he breathed in and out from her hair.

After a moment he muttered, "I love your scent, Lucy. You smell like home."

Lucianne couldn't stop the tears from escaping her eyes. Home. The word reached into the deepest parts of her heart, sending a gentle warmth throughout her body as the feelings of belonging, desire and love flow through her. When Xandar felt his shirt absorbing some of her teardrops, he panicked.

He immediately lifted her chin up and asked in concern, "What is it, baby? What's wrong? Is it the pain from the poison?"

Lucianne chuckled lightly and shook her adorable little head before pressing her lips deeply on her confused mate's lips. When she pulled away, she whispered firmly, "You feel like home, Xandar. My home." Xandar's own eyes began glistening in pure joy and happiness as he planted another deep kiss on her lips. They only pulled away when the doorbell rang.

The staff came in with a long trolley with their food, and set it right in front of the couch. After leaving with a generous tip, Lucianne was about to dig in before Xandar took her plate away. She looked at him in bewilderment but when he took the knife and fork that were already in her hands, she got pissed. "Xandar, that's my food!"

Xandar chuckled at her annoyed expression before pecking a kiss on her cheek. "I'm feeding you, my love. You just recovered. You should take things slow."

"Not this slow!" Lucianne tried to reach for her plate again but Xandar held it away from her before calming her down with another kiss on her lips. When their lips parted, his eyes penetrated into hers as he uttered, "Let me, Lucy. Let me feed you." Another brief kiss, then he added, "Let me love you." 📍

Lucianne sighed in defeat and said, "It's not fair, Xandar. You know I can't say no to you when you use that line."

Xandar's expression brightened in realization, "Wait, really? I didn't know that! So, our Goddess is fair then! I used to think that she gave you those innocent doe-eyes to make me melt and give in but gave me nothing to do the same to you." he pecked another kiss on her cheek and said, "Thanks for the tip, babe."

Lucianne emitted a low growl of hunger and irritation. Xandar then dropped his humour and surrendered as he said, "Right, let's get you fed, my hangry little freesia."

He placed her on his lap and started slicing small cubes of the steak. After two small bites, Lucianne complained, "Xandar, my mouth can fit more than that! Just cut them a little bigger!"

He nuzzled his nose with her earlobe and whispered, "As you wish, my Queen." A visible red blush graced Lucianne's cheeks, which made Xandar smile and his animal pur. The intensity of redness was returning to normal, much to their relief.

After Lucianne had cleaned her plate, Xandar dabbed a wet tissue on her lips and around her mouth before he reached for his mildly-warm spaghetti. When he lifted up his fork and was about to dig in, Lucianne pulled his plate away and snatched the fork from his hand. His shocked eyes met her bright, taunting ones.

"Babe, what are you doing?"

"Feeding you." she answered simply while skillfully swirling the noodles with the fork.

"No, sweetheart. You're supposed to be res—"

"Please?" she showed him her doe-eyes, and Xandar groaned as he gave in, making Lucianne let out a cheeky laughter in response. Her chuckles made his body gravitate towards hers, closing whatever distance between them. His arms circled her waist, and his head rested on her shoulder as he waited to be fed.

Xandar didn't realise how hungry he was until the first mouthful of spaghetti. It was only then he remembered he hadn't eaten a proper meal since Lucianne was hospitalized. His eyes never left his beautiful mate's face. When the plate was empty, Lucianne's hand lifted his chin up as she gently wiped away the little stains the food made. When she was done, she muttered a satisfied, "There." 2

As she was retracting her hand from his chin, he grabbed hold of her wrist, and pecked a kiss on her thumb before uttering in his husky voice, "Thank you, baby."

Before Lucianne could respond, Xandar's eyes glazed over.

'Cuz, the Chief just called. He couldn't reach your house or your phone so he called me.' Christian linked ominously.

'Sh*t. My phone must have died.' Xandar linked guiltily, and took note of his cousin's unusually serious tone before he linked, 'What did he say?'

Christian sighed. 'The four ministers they arrested are pleading not guilty to the charges, saying that they were coerced to do what they did. They claimed that the true mastermind blackmailed them to siphon government funds.'

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Xandar instinctively pressed Lucianne's body on his chest to calm himself before he asked his cousin, 'They gave the name of the one running Wu Bi Corp?'

'Yes, I can't believe we didn't see it! It was so obvious! Cuz, do you know how stupid I feel right now?'

'Who is it, Christian?'

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'Greg.' Christian linked.

Xandar took a moment to digest that fact before he linked, 'They all said that?'

'Yup.'

Xandar sighed before he asked, 'I hope they're arresting him, then?'

'Uh-huh. teams have already been deployed when the Chief made the call to your place. He just wanted to let you know seeing that he's your other cousin.'

'I see. Thanks for letting me know, Christian.'

'No problem. Charge your phone, cuz.'

'Yeah, I'll do that.'

When his eyes cleared, he saw that both of Lucianne's small hands were wrapped around one of his large ones as she traced the lines on his palm and fingers. Lucianne didn't know that the mind-link had ended, and she continued minding her own business with her mate's rough and strong hands. But when Xandar suddenly trapped both of hers in the one she was playing with, her eyes snapped up to his partially onyx orbs.

"It's Greg, baby." he uttered ominously.

Lucianne blinked in confusion as she asked, "Greg is what, darling?"

He hugged her close as he explained, "Greg is the leader of Wu Bi Corp. He ordered the silver that hurt you in the Jewel Pack. He sent those rogues that killed so many of your kind. He was the one who came up with the scheme of siphoning funds. I don't know if he forced Cummings and the others to join his corrupted scheme, but he was definitely the one spearheading it. Odds are, he even had Tanner send that assassin after Russell which got you hurt, using her to cover his tracks."

Lucianne's soft face turned serious as she pondered on his words. Something seemed off to her. If it really were Greg, and if he really wanted to kill her with silver and Goddess knows whatever else he had access to with Wu Bi's resources, how was she still alive?

He could very well kill her whenever she was alone: on her morning runs when Xandar hadn't joined her yet; when she excused herself from the dining hall to use the washroom; whenever she was in her hotel room alone; or even before Xandar arrived at the hospital after she fell unconscious. Annie was there with her but Greg wouldn't have been scared of the Duchess.

If he wanted her dead... why go after Russell? If Greg really wrote the note on the knife, why was it addressed to Ellia and not Lucianne herself? Ellia didn't even know Greg as far as Lucianne and Annie could gather from their conversations with her.

"Baby, a penny for your thoughts?" Xandar said with obvious worry.

Lucianne's doubtful expression met his when she asked with furrowed eyebrows, "Are you sure it's

Greg?"

Xandar blinked in surprise before he responded, "Their stories seem to match up. Cummings and the others, I mean. If it wasn't Greg, why would they all say that it's him?"

"If it were Greg... why would he go after Russell? It makes no sense."

"I don't know, baby. Maybe it was a trap to get the Oleander into you. Maybe the note and Russell was just to mislead us." Xandar scoffed darkly as he muttered, "And he had the gall to come to the hospital that day."

"Wait, what?"

Xandar's still-onyx eyes locked with her completely-lost black orbs as he said in an angered-suppressed voice, "When they were doing the blood transfusion, Greg came. He wanted to know what happened. Hmph." Xandar shook his head. "As if he didn't know. He was probably there to gloat."

Lucianne asked suspiciously, "What did he say?"

"He asked what happened to you. After Dr Gina came out and told us that there was a chance you may be alright, that you were healing yourself from Oleander, he blew up, blaming me that the Oleander got into your system." Xandar shook his head before he muttered, "What a convincing, manipulative hypocrite he is."

"Xand—" Lucianne was interrupted by the doorbell.

Their sights glanced at the door and then back at each other before Xandar asked, "Were you expecting someone, Lucy?"

"No." she said, as lost as her mate was at the moment.

Before she could get it, Xandar walked ahead of her and his hand subconsciously shielded her body from the front. As soon as Xandar turned the knob and saw that it was just Chief Dalloway, his arm that was in front of Lucy moved to her back, circling her waist and pulling her close to the side of his body. After exchanging bows, the Chief got to the point.

"The Duke told me you'd be here, your Highnesses. I apologize for the intrusion but this couldn't wait. The...other Duke was not in his residence. Our people are still searching. But we retrieved something from his home when we sought to arrest him. It was addressed to you..." He handed a beige envelope in his hand to Lucianne and continued, "My Queen."

"Me?" Lucianne asked in surprise.

The Chief nodded, and Lucianne hesitantly took the envelope from his hand. She and Xandar read the cover together, which read 'H.R.H. Queen Lucianne'. Her future title was scribbled almost illegibly, but her name 'Lucianne' was written clearly, even beautifully. Lucianne turned it to the back and found that it was sealed by the seal of a Duke. In the whole Kingdom, only the King, Queen, Dukes and Duchesses had their personal seals but these were rarely used.

Before Lucianne could open it, Xandar's fingers fell lightly on hers that were trying to open the envelope as he suggested in a soft voice, "Baby, maybe I should do it. Just in case."

Lucianne narrowed her eyes at her worried mate as she retorted sarcastically, "In case of what? Poison pollen?" Before Xandar could say or do anything, she broke the seal and opened the envelope that contained a folded note. The outside was blank. She unfolded it and found a microchip stuck with tape on the inside, and only one line in Greg's almost illegible handwriting: this should get you a head start, my Queen.

Without glancing at the two men, Lucianne said, "Come in, Chief. Looks like this is something we should all see."

Her tone gave no room for discussion, and the Chief obliged without another word. Lucianne got out her laptop and placed the microchip in her SD card before inserting it into her laptop. And they waited.

Lucianne clicked on the only folder in the chip, and the folder expanded to a seemingly-infinite list of all kinds of things, from phone records to bank transactions to names. The three of them were left speechless as Lucianne skimmed through one file after another.

When she found the one on audits, and realized that the details matched with the ones they went through with Ellia and the others, Lucianne stared at the screen as she asked aloud, "If Greg really is behind this, why would he disappear and leave me this? Why didn't he just disappear without a trace?"

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"Yeah, cuz. Why?" Christian asked between trying to lay a punch on Xandar at training after Xandar told him about Greg's message.

When Xandar pinned Christian on the ground and got him to surrender, Christian accepted his best friend's outstretched hand to help him up as he smiled and said, "Wow, the Queen sure knows her stuff. Within five minutes of teaching you the new technique, she got you to take me down faster than you ever have. I'm practicing it next, just to be fair."

When Xandar offered a meek smile and said nothing, Christian patted his shoulder and asked, "So, does she have any theories on Greg?"

"No." Xandar answered flatly.

"Do you?" Christian asked.

When the cousins locked eyes, Christian saw that he had hit the jackpot, "So, what's your theory, cuz? Judging by the way you look, I doubt you told the Queen."

Xandar instinctively looked around to make sure Lucianne wasn't nearby before he asked his cousin, "Do you think Greg may be in love with her?"

Christian's eyes snapped wide before he scoffed and burst out laughing. Seeing that many were starting to look their way, Christian decided to use their mind-link, 'Greg? Love? Cuz, how did your brain even relate Greg to that word? The dude knows nothing about something as sacred as love! He never did! He sleeps with a different woman every night, remember?'

'I asked the Chief about his whereabouts this morning. Greg's still missing. And when they looked through the footage from his house, only one woman came and left his house once in the last nine days.'

'So, the significance of that is that Greg knows what love is?'

'No. The significance of that is that Greg and Lucy met nine days ago. I counted.'

'So? It wasn't the Queen who went to his house. He's still sleeping around...well, more selectively now, it seems, with one woman and all.'

'That's the problem.' Xandar's eyes locked with his cousin before he continued, 'They didn't sleep together. He threw that woman out on his lawn despite the advances she made.'

This got Christian's attention. Doubt began to grow in his eyes. 'Greg doesn't reject offers. Are they sure, cuz?'

Xandar nodded. 'The police had already looked through three weeks worth of footage when I called. Before Greg and Lucy met, he had a woman every night. But from the night after they met, the women just...vanished.'

Christian got lost in thought before he linked baselessly, 'It's not possible. Greg wouldn't...love. He doesn't even know what that is. And he never puts anyone before himself.'

'Then why would he leave that incriminating evidence to Lucy before disappearing? Why not just leave it with the police or with you or me?'

'Okay, cuz. First, he hates us as much as we hate him. Second, he hates everything and everyone in law enforcement, that includes the police.'

'Lucy's on our side. Why doesn't he hate her like he does us?'

Christian was left speechless. He didn't have an explanation. So, Xandar continued, 'Remember the other day at the hospital? He came and asked about Lucy? He said I was supposed to protect her?'

Christian scoffed. 'He yelled, you mean?'

'I thought he was just trying to make me feel worse than I already was. What if his outburst was because he actually cared about what happened to her?'

'Just because he demanded to know the truth, it doesn't mean he cares, cuz.'

'Then why did he go see the assassin's corpse after he left our floor, and asked the nurse in-charge about the murderer's condition and identity? I didn't even do that.'

Christian's eyebrows raised in surprise as he linked, 'Greg did what?'

'You heard me. The nurse was probably the last person who spoke to him before he disappeared.'

'Wait...' Christian paused to digest everything before he asked, 'Why would Greg want to know who almost killed the Queen if he was the one who ordered the kill?'

'Maybe he wasn't the one who ordered it.'

'Tanner...' Christian began pondering.

Xandar helped him through his thoughts, 'May have been acting on her own when she hired the assassin for Russell. If she was coerced, it's getting difficult to believe that it was Greg.'

'But if Greg is innocent, why would he see the need to disappear now?'

'He's innocent in this, in not killing Russell or Lucy. But he is still involved in the corruption we have against those five. He can't get away with that. He handed every piece of evidence to incriminate the five people and himself.'

'Greg? Incriminate himself? Why would he do that? What's he playing at?'

Xandar shook his head, 'I don't know. As insane as this is going to sound, I hope this is just another trick of his. I don't want him falling for my mate.'

A memory suddenly came to Christian. On the night after the Kyltons came and were kicked out by Lucianne, and a few of them went out to get some air, Greg left the hall with them. 'Let's not start another scene, distant cousin. Our Queen has handled enough for one night.', was what Greg said. Christian remembered being surprised by how sincere that other Duke sounded.

Christian sighed, 'When I said the Queen was attracting every other mateless creature, I didn't mean Greg, too. Probably shouldn't have said that.' After a moment of silence, he asked 'Does the

Queen believe he's guilty?'

'Yes, but not to the extent of what Cummings and the others are claiming Greg to be. She thinks Greg is involved but he isn't the mastermind.'

From Xandar's stoned face and worried eyes, Christian himself couldn't believe that he had to say this next sentence just to assure himself, 'Please tell me you don't think she may be in love with Greg.'

'She's defending him.'

'CUZ! YOU HAVE GOT TO BE F*CKING KIDDING ME!! THE QUEEN IS JUST SEEING THINGS AS IT IS! I'M DEFENDING HER NOW! DO YOU THINK I'M IN LOVE WITH HER?'

Xandar looked at his cousin, and Christian fierce voice continued to ring through their link, 'If you answer my question wrongly, cuz. I'm getting the Queen to teach me a technique to beat you up for the rest of today. Maybe I'll be able to knock some sense into you.'

Xandar could only look at the ground when he linked, 'You have no idea how scared I am of losing her, of her choosing someone else over me.'

Christian punched Xandar in his jaw without warning, and the King fell to the ground in shock. The Duke had had it with his cousin's almost zero faith in Lucianne's loyalty to him so he declared mercilessly, "You needed that, cuz. The Queen would've done the same thing if she heard what you just said."

"What did he say?" Lucianne's voice came all of a sudden, and both cousins flinched at her presence. Toby was next to her as he studied the situation.