

King Breeder 61

## Chapter 61 Is He Back?

I relaxed a little—but not completely.

“Who are you?” I asked him.

He was tall, with a muscular build. He had that same strong, chiseled jawline and dark hair, though his wasn't black like Ethan's.

They looked so very much the same. There were clear differences between them, but they were slight—the dip of his nose, the space between his eyes, and his eyes. They reminded me of Ethan's, but they were gray.

The biggest difference, though, was this man's smile.

It came so easily, so naturally, like the sun rising in the morning and setting in the evening. It just happened without effort.

In all of the time I was with Ethan, how often did I see him smile? Hardly ever at all, and when I did, it always seemed forced.

The man's expression thus made it impossible to mistake him for Ethan.

Who was this person? And could I trust him?

Just like with the dangers of the forest – a coiled snake behind a fallen log, a beautiful tantalizing mushroom that might be poison – I couldn't assume that he wasn't deadly just because he looked kind and inviting.

The man didn't answer my question for a long moment. Instead, he came over to where I was sitting and made himself comfortable next to me, his hips settling near my feet on the bed. I was still curled up, but if I were to stretch my legs back out, he would be nearer to my waist.

His hand reached up and gently brushed my cheek. I flinched, but I realized that he was simply checking my wound.

“Your face seems to be healing already. That's good. I'm sure it still hurts. I can get you some more medicine, if you'd like.”

“Who are you?” I asked again, pulling away from his hand.

I hadn't forgotten my station in life, and for all I knew, this man was pretty important. If this was his house, it was opulent, and he was wearing nice clothing—a black button-down shirt and black slacks.

Besides. I didn't want to be rude, but I also didn't appreciate a strange man dragging his hands down my skin, either.

He smiled at me. "You can call me Soren," he said.

"Soren?" I repeated. It was an interesting name. I couldn't tell if it was his first or last, either.

"That's right," he said, "Can I get you anything? You must be hungry. When we brought you in, you were so injured, we just wanted to make sure *we* got some water and medicine. But now that you're awake, I think we should get you something to eat."

I stared at him for a long moment, not sure how to respond. I wanted to trust him, but I still wasn't sure *if* I could.

"Why are you helping me?" I asked him.

"Because..." he paused for a moment. "I feel just awful about what happened to you."

He seemed so sincere, and yet, I had a tough time believing him. Maybe it was because he looked so much like Ethan— and Ethan would never, ever say those words to anyone.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, a beautiful young woman comes here to our islands, for who knows what reason— I imagine, for a fresh start. She's probably excited to be here, and then..." he sighed. "Out of nowhere some hooligans step in and rough her up, taking her stuff and injuring her."

He shook his head, a sad expression on his handsome face. "That's just not right."

"How do you know I came here to start again?" I asked him.

"Oh, that's why a lot of people come here," he replied nonchalantly. "It's a beautiful place to make a new beginning."

He smiled at me, and I felt a warmth inside, like maybe he was right.

Like maybe I could start over.

That didn't mean my past was completely behind me, though. I had to remember that. Madalynn could still be after me. So could other people.

I wrapped my arm around my abdomen protectively. I felt like I was safe in this room at this moment, though.

Wasn't I?

“I’m not sure how long I’ll be staying,” I said with a sigh.

A look of disappointment clouded his face for a moment, as if he were upset that I wasn’t going to be there forever.

“Okay,” he said. “But regardless. I feel really bad that you were injured on my watch and I can’t let that happen.”

“Your watch?” I repeated.

“I am currently in charge of the security here. And I can guarantee that whoever those b\*stards were, I’ll hunt them down and make sure they pay.”

He paused, and changed to a much kinder tone. “But those are not for you to worry about. You are safe here. You can be sure of that.”

I *knew my eyes were* wide as I stared at him. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing—from a man who looked so much like Ethan

“What is it?” he asked me. “Why are you looking at me.. like that?”

“It’s just you just reminded me of someone, that’s all,” I told him.

He cleared his throat. “Someone kind, intelligent, and dashinglly handsome, I presume,” he joked. He held his hand up to his chin and made a face, one eyebrow raised, posing for me.

I couldn’t help but laugh at his silly behavior. “Uh, someone intelligent and dashinglly handsome, yes...”

My voice faded away as I thought about the other adjective he’d used. “But maybe not so much that other part.”

He put his hand down and dropped it onto my leg, which was still under the cover. He did it naturally, and seemingly without any sensual intentions, so it didn’t make me feel uncomfortable.

“I’m so sorry,” he said in a gentle voice. “Well, while you’re here, rest assured, you will be cared for. I will make sure your every need is met. You can stay in my home as long as you need to. I will help you find a job, if that’s what you came here for...”

“Thank you, but I’ve troubled you enough...”

“No trouble at all,” he interrupted me. “I insist!”

“But—”

“There is no ‘but.’” He raised his index finger and waved it left and right. There was a delightful smile on his face.

I was learning something about this man. He had the magic to make people around him feel relaxed and lighthearted.

“But surely I can’t be the first person to be the victim of a crime on your island,” I tried to reason with him.

“No,” he admitted with a slight shrug of his broad, muscular shoulders. “But you just might be the most beautiful.”

I stared at him for a second, my eyes wide.

He withdrew his hand and cleared his throat, seeming to feel awkward. “I’ll, uh, go have the maids make you something to eat.”

He stood, and I instantly felt a few degrees cooler, like his nearness had warmed me without me even realizing it until he was gone.

“Thank you,” I told him as he stepped toward the door.

“Of course,” he said, giving me a kind smile. “Oh, and I forgot to ask... what’s your name?”

I thought about the persona I’d made up earlier and decided I needed to stick with it, for now.

“Ro,” I said. “My name is Ro.”

He arched an eyebrow for a moment, like he was surprised at that name, but then he nodded.

“Ro. Interesting. All right. I’ll see you soon.”

I lifted a hand and gave him a wave.

When he was gone, I settled back into my pillows and rested a hand on my abdomen.

Soren seemed like a good person, but I just had a feeling that I was missing something.

Something important.

In the war room, everyone was busy, and no one bothered to ask me how I was doing. Even Talon let it be.

I was glad for that.

My beta leaned in to explain the next agenda item. “We have a witness,” he said. “A man that they picked up

near the scene of the attack at one of the northern villages. When our men got to him, everyone thought he was dead, but he survived. He may be able to provide information to help us identify which rogue groups are involved.”

Talon signaled for the witness to be brought in.

The man was thin and a bit dirty, his clothes disheveled as if he’d been traveling for a while. His eyes *were* downcast when he stepped through the door between two guards. He was middle-aged, and looked like he could’ve been a business owner of some sort. I had no reason to think he would not be a reliable witness.

The moment he lifted his eyes and saw my face, he took several steps back.

“You..!”

S as

The guards grabbed him by the shoulders as he moaned in fear, his skin paling, his eyes wide. “Calm down!” one of the guards shouted, pulling on him roughly. “This is Alpha Ethan! Be respectful.”

As I watched his bizarre reaction, an unpleasant thought occurred to me.

I looked towards Talon, who immediately understood my concern.

“It’s all right.” Talon stepped in, putting his hand up to still the guards and keep them from hurting the man as he struggled against them. “We’re scaring him.”

Talon gave the man a cup of water, then spoke in an assertive but soothing tone. “I assure you, you have nothing to fear here. All of us are loyal to the king.”

Some of the man’s fear seemed to dissipate, though he was still leaning back toward the door.

Talon looked around the room and suggested, “Too many of us here could overwhelm the witness. Please allow me to speak with him in private. I’ll provide a detailed report in two hours.”

I gave him a nod. With my approval, no one else had any further objections.

Once Talon moved the witness to a comfortable private room, he mindlinked me.

“Now you can speak freely,” I heard Talon say in a soft tone.

“Ye-. yes, sir,” the man muttered.

Word by word, Talon asked, “Did you see Alpha Ethan– the one standing next to me just now– during the attack?”

It sounded like the cup in the witness’s hand fell on the ground. I heard water splashed.

“Do not be afraid. You can speak the truth.” Talon’s voice was assuring and convincing.

But I knew I didn’t want to hear the answer.

“Ye–yes,” the witness stammered,

My heart sank

No one else looked so much like me except for him.

After these many years, was he still alive after all?

“Are you back?” I asked myself.

Chapter 62 Are You Sure Rosalie Is Dead?

\*\*Talon’s POV

I rejoined Ethan outside the meeting room after hearing out from the witness. Neither of us spoke until we got to Ethan’s suite.

As he closed the door behind us, his look turned even more solemn.

“Alpha,” I began, “if it really is him working with the rogues, I’m worried that our pack...”

Ethan walked over to the map. “Send Estrella back to Drogomor and tell Rex to reorganize our defenses back home. Move the residents from the outskirts back to the city center, and increase the patrol back home.”

“Are we not going back?”

“No. Rogue attacks are problems, but any alphas could deal with them, and they have been dealing with it. But the war against Kal is a military operation. If we lose it, we will lose more than just a few villages. My priority has to be on the west coast.”

“I understand,” I said with a sigh. “I’m still worried about Drogomor. The rogues are taking advantage of the war. What if...”

“His target is me, and only me... I’ll need to talk to James to move our men to the coast near the East Port, and we’ll need to convince the other Alphas to guard the rest of the coastal cities and deal with the scattered rogue attacks.”

“No! That’s too risky! Then he would know you’re there.”

“That’s the point. I need him to come to me instead of us trying to find him. Also, if we lose the East Port, we may lose the war.”

A knock on the door interrupted our discussion. As far as I was aware, Ethan wasn’t expecting anyone.

“Please open the door, Ethan.” It was the last voice either of us wanted to hear right now.

Madalynn.

She must have heard that the meeting in the war room was finished for the day. I was surprised she used the word “please.”

Ethan didn’t say anything, but his expression was as cold as ice.

I sighed, and went to open the door. “How may I help you, Miss Madalynn?”

“Beta Talon, I wish to speak to Ethan.”

“Miss Madalynn, we are dealing with an urgent situation right now. I can relay to message to him—”

“I’m his fiancée. *Are* you saying that I can’t even talk to him in person?” she snapped. “Also, it’s none of your business what I need to speak with him about.”

Before I could stop her, she had already barged into the room.

“Ethan!” Madalynn exclaimed, seemingly very eager to see him. But he was clearly not in the mood to see her.

She turned back to me. “Talon, leave us.”

I didn’t move, waiting for my Alpha’s order.

Ethan looked up to her. I saw a dark look in his eyes. He didn’t mindlink me, but I didn’t need it to know what a dangerous state he was in. I felt like I should stay in case I needed to pull my Alpha back from hurting his unwelcome visitor.

Madalynn wasn’t happy that I didn’t do what she asked. She sneered and hissed, “I am the future Luna and I have a private matter to talk to Ethan about. Talon, leave us.”

“There’s nothing for you and me to discuss,” Ethan finally spoke up. His tone sounded as if he could kill someone right there.

Madalynn gave me a frustrated glare, then switched her attention back to Ethan.

Her tone softened immediately, and her eyes became moist. I was disgusted by the falseness of her total persona change in a manner of seconds.

“Ethan, please just hear me out. I promise it’ll be quick.”

Ethan wasn’t moved by her pleading tone or tear-filled eyes, but his silence was more than enough for Madalynn to proceed.

Madalynn’s eyes flickered to me again as if she was waiting for something. She was more polite this time. “Talon, do you mind giving us some privacy?”

“Madalynn, whatever you have to say, you can say with Talon present,” Ethan interjected. “You have three minutes.”

Madalynn glanced over at me a final time with displeasure. However, the flicker of anger passed quickly, and she returned to the solemn, upset expression she kept making at Ethan. She walked closer to him and took a couple deep breaths.

“Ethan, I just came to apologize for what happened the other day.”

This was the last thing I expected to hear from Madalynn.

Ethan didn’t show any particular emotion on his face, but I knew he was as surprised as me.

“I’m *very* sorry for the way that I acted. It wasn’t very ladylike of me. It wasn’t acceptable, and I don’t want you to think that I am incapable of doing the job that is intended for me as your future Luna.”

Ethan’s gaze finally landed on Madalynn, and she took it as an invitation to go on with her speech.

“I was jealous. That was why I said the hurtful things I did before,” she continued.

As she spoke, she moved *even* closer to Ethan. Her arm reached out toward him, but he stepped back and *avoided* it.

“Ethan!” she exclaimed in annoyance as Ethan walked behind the desk.

“I’ve heard your apology,” he said with a nod. “If there’s nothing else, you may leave now,” he added, dismissing her with an *even* tone.

Madalynn looked toward Ethan, wide-eyed, as if she couldn't believe he would cut the conversation so short. She wasn't done yet.

"Ethan, let me finish! It was just that Rosalie was so sweet, and everyone seemed so taken with her. I was

jealous of her, especially because she carried your child—"

"Enough Madalynn!" Ethan's reaction was much more intense this time.

"I know you cared about her, and I accept that." Then she looked up to Ethan, and word by word, stressed, "but she is in the past now! Rosalie is gone!"

Ethan's fists clenched, and I could see his chest moving up and down faster than usual.

No one had dared to mention Rosalie in front of Ethan for over a week now. Everyone knew his wishes, and I was quite sure Madalynn had gotten the word, too. Yet, she did it anyway, intentionally.

"Ethan! I know you're hurting, and I am too, watching you suffer like this. I feel sorry for her, but we need to move on, and I'm here for you,"

The look on Ethan's face was terrifying even for me, and I knew I needed to step in before this conversation got any worse.

I put myself between them, shielding Madalynn from Ethan's murderous gaze. "Miss Madalynn, I'm very sorry to interrupt, but with everything going on, the Alpha does need to focus on the war effort."

I quickly walked up to her, grabbing her by the shoulders and gently pulling her away. I needed to get her out before he exploded. "Please allow me to escort you back to your room."

"Stay out of this, Talon. This is none of your business!" she snapped, glaring at me and pulling away.

"Leave now," Ethan growled slowly.

He was trying his best to control his anger. If it wasn't for the alliance

"Leave? I'm your fiancée." She broke into tears. "Ethan, how could you do this to me? Do you know how heartbroken I feel seeing you like this? I just want to love you and give you an heir!"

I frowned.

I looked towards Ethan. His brows furrowed, and his lips were pressed tightly against each other.

Madalynn was manipulative. She knew exactly when to test boundaries, and when to play the pity card.

However, seeing tears start to stream down Madalynn's face didn't soften Ethan. Instead, he had lost the last little bit of his patience.

"Madalynn, don't make me repeat myself a third time."

Ethan wasn't moved at all by her acting, but Madalynn didn't seem to be too disappointed, It seemed as if she had expected this would happen.

She finally sighed and wiped away her tears. "Okay, Ethan. I understand that you need more time. I can give you more time. I'm always here for you."

At that, she walked out the door,

Ethan and I looked at each other for a moment, but neither of us could pick up our earlier discussion from where *we* left off,

Then I spotted a handkerchief on the floor. It was Madalynn's. Ethan's eye fell on it too, and he looked like he could barely stand the sight of it.

I figured it would be best to return it to her myself in case she found another excuse to come to his room.

Without another word, I left the room and hurried down the hall, soon catching up with Madalynn and her lady's maid.

"Miss Madalynn, how could Alpha Ethan treat you like that!" the maid was saying. "It's so unfair! You are his future Luna, and you deserve to be pampered, not scolded!"

"Shut up! What do you know, stupid girl?"

Based on Madalynn's tone, I could hardly believe that she was crying pitifully only a couple minutes ago.

"Miss Madalynn, I just feel unworthy of you!" the maid mumbled.

Theard the sneer in Madalynn's voice as she said, "Ethan is mine. What can a dead woman do, anyway? I just need to be patient..."

The maid lowered her voice. "Miss Madalynn, are you sure Rosalie is dead?"

Upon hearing Rosalie's name, I quietened my footsteps and tried to get closer. Then I heard Madalynn's vicious response: "I know for a fact that she is!"

Rosalie jumping off the cliff wasn't a secret, and most people in this castle had their own sources of information. But the way she said it just made me uneasy.

I really didn't want to interact with Madalynn any more today, so I let the handkerchief drop on the hallway floor and returned to Ethan's suite.

## Chapter 63 He Invited Me To Dinner

\*\*Rosalie's POV

Three days had passed since I had arrived at Avondale..

The island had lovely weather. However, I spent most of the time in my room. As Soren insisted, I needed to take it very slow for my recovery just to be safe, for the baby's sake. That was the doctor's order, as well.

The lovely scent from the fresh flowers, the morning sun pouring in through the window to land softly on my blanket– everything was perfect, but it just felt irrelevant to me.

I'd gotten away from Ethan, and I had gotten the freedom that I wanted. So why wasn't I happy?

I tried not to think about him, because every time I did, it felt like there was a huge weight on my chest and I could barely breathe.

I had gotten this far, and I knew I should carry on with my new life– but my heart was telling me that it just needed a little more time.

It was painful to be alone right now. I needed to find something to keep myself occupied so that I wouldn't think about Ethan.

I sat up when I heard a knock at my door. In came the doctor, a very nice old gentleman.

“How is my favorite patient doing today?” He chuckled. “I hope, much better.”

“Yes, I do feel much better than I have, but I'm still a bit sore.”

I was being honest. The better he understood how I felt, the better he could help me with a speedy recovery.

“Well, that is to be expected, my dear.”

After checking my vitals and the wounds, he said, “You're doing well– in fact, your recovery is much faster than I anticipated–so no need to continue bed rest. However, I don't want you on your feet for too long. You don't need to overexert yourself.”

I was nodding to acknowledge the doctor's words when I heard another knock at the door.

“Miss Ro.” This time, it was a young female voice.

“Please come in.”

It was the housemaid Lola. She had a few books and magazines in her hands.

“Oh, Doctor—*sorry* for interrupting!”

“No *worries* at all! We are just wrapping up. Everything is on track, and Miss Ro should be all good in two or three *weeks*. I’ll check back in early next week. Have a good day, ladies.”

“Thank you, doctor!” Lola and I said at the same time. Then we exchanged a look and both giggled.

Lola was always so upbeat,

She smiled and *said*, “Miss Ro, the Master said that he imagines you’re getting bored after a few days of being in

this room, and he wondered whether you had any interest in reading some books?”

My eyes widened. It was as if he could read my mind.

“That’s just perfect!” | exclaimed. “Your master is so thoughtful. Please pass my gratitude on to him, and thank you so much for bringing them to me.”

“It’s my pleasure, Miss Ro. The Master is coming back tonight from his trip. He asked whether he could have the honor of joining you for dinner at home tonight?”

Immediately, my stomach twisted into a tight knot. “Dinner?” I asked.

It wasn’t that Soren hadn’t been absolutely kind to me in every way. I’d just gotten used to being a bit of a recluse. I wasn’t sure how good I’d be at making small talk, especially with a man I hardly knew—a man that looked just like Ethan!

“Yes, dinner with him.” She seemed to notice I was hesitant, so she encouraged me, “It’ll be fine. He’s quite charming.”

I’d give it a try. Because Soren had been so kind to me, even though he didn’t have to be.

“Um— of course. Your master is too kind.”

“That’s wonderful! I’ll let the master know. He would be very happy!”

Topened my mouth again, wanting to ask her not to stand in ceremony with me all the time— I thought of her more as a friend than a servant. But before I could, she bowed to me and exited the room.

My eyes landed on the books she had dropped off, but my mind drifted to Soren.

Thadn't really seen him since we first met. Being in charge of the island's security had to keep him busy, but that made him the best host I could ever ask for. He had provided everything that I needed to help me recover, and I was grateful for it.

It was just that.. he reminded me too much of Ethan.

I sighed to myself.

He was not Ethan, though, and I was starting to feel like I was being a rude guest.

Lola came into my room in the afternoon carrying a blue dress.

“Miss Ro,” she began. “Mr. Soren will be home in about an hour. We should get you ready.”

I was a little nervous because I didn't know what to expect for dinner.

I glanced at the dress, and felt relieved that it wasn't anything fancy. It was just a knee-length blue dress with short sleeves made out of a cotton blend. It wasn't slinky, it didn't look revealing at all, and it wasn't going to make me feel like I was at one of those fancy dinner parties that Ethan always had to attend.

Getting ready *wasn't* a long process, and Lola was very pleasant to work with.

An hour later, I was *ready* to go. I had the blue dress on and a pair of strappy black sandals. My bruises weren't completely healed, but Lola *was* very good at covering them with makeup.

With Ethan's necklace around my neck, I felt a bit torn between two worlds.

Lola had gone down a few minutes earlier to help the chefs get everything ready. Soren's house was huge, but

he didn't have a big staff, so Lola needed to help out.

A knock on the door pulled my eyes away from my reflection. He was here.

I took a deep breath and went to answer it.

Pulling the door open, I saw Soren standing there with a bouquet of white lilies. He looked very handsome in a dark suit with a blue tie that was almost the same color as my dress. He looked so much like Ethan—except for his bright, sincere smile.

“Wow!” was the first word out of his mouth. “My goodness, Ro! Look at you! You look gorgeous.”

I looked at the flowers to avoid his gaze. He hadn't dropped his eyes down my body or made me uncomfortable or anything, but I wasn't used to having a stranger complimenting me like that.

“Thank you, Soren, but the flowers were not necessary...” Just to be polite, I added, “you look nice too.”

“Ah, well, I switched my daytime suit out for a nighttime suit,” he replied, unfurling his hand like a model, and then he ignored my comment about the flowers. “These are for you. They need water, but don't worry. Lola will run up and put them in a vase while we're eating. Let's hurry so the food doesn't get cold.”

I wondered if he was starving, but his eagerness for food suddenly made me look forward to dinner a little more. I signed inwardly, took the flowers and set them inside, and then stepped out into the hallway.

“Thank you for joining me for dinner,” he said as we walked next to one another down the hall. “It's not often that I have company in this house. And, you know, I like to talk.”

I tried to be polite as we got to the stairs. “I'll be a good listener.”

He laughed happily at my comment. “Hold onto the railing,” he reminded me. “We'll take our time. I'll stay on your other side and make sure that you don't fall.”

He was thoughtful. I'd never met a man quite like him before.

We made it down the stairs to his opulently-appointed dining room. He pulled out my chair, and I sat down to a lovely chicken dinner with a side of mashed potatoes and asparagus.

“Lola,” Soren said as the two of us began our dinner, “how has your day been?”

She was in the process of pouring him some wine, and me some nonalcoholic sparkling cider.

“Good, thank you. I always have a nice time hanging out with Miss Ro.”

“That's good to hear,” he said. “Did you get a chance to work on your painting?”

“I did,” she said with a smile. “Thank you for asking.”

Turning to me, he said, “Has Lola mentioned to you that she is quite the artist?”

I shook my head, feeling a little embarrassed that I hadn't asked much about what Lola liked to do in her spare time. “No, I didn't realize. That's great.”

“Yes, she’s very talented. In fact, that landscape behind you is one of hers. I bought it from her last year.”

I turned to see a beautiful forest scene. It wasn’t quite as good as the professional paintings I’d seen in the castle, but it was obvious that she had talent.

“I love it.” I told her. “The little cottage in the background is particularly beautiful.” “Thank you,” Lola said, the apples of her cheeks a bit pink. “One day, I’d like to be a professional, but for now, I

just paint for fun.”

“What about you, Ro? What do you like to do for fun?” Soren asked as he was cutting into his chicken.

I finished chewing the bite that was in my mouth. It was so tender and juicy and practically melted between my teeth. Unfortunately, I wasn’t in the mood to appreciate the deliciousness.

I forced myself to swallow so that I wouldn’t look rude to my host, and answered, “I like to crochet.”

Certain aspects of my life were secrets that I would have to hide from everyone, but it was surely safe to share what my hobby was,

“That’s amazing,” he said. “Are you working on something for the baby?”

“I was...” I said, a forkful of mashed potatoes poised in front of me. “But I lost it.”

I learnt how to knit in the Drogomor pack...

Soren noticed my mood change, and said comfortingly, “I’m sure you can make another one in the future.” Then he switched the topic, “By the way, that is a lovely necklace you’re wearing. Where did you get it?”

Suddenly, I felt my blood run cold. My fingers went to my necklace, and I absently rubbed the jewels between my thumb and first finger.

I didn’t know how to answer him.

I wasn’t ready to talk about Ethan—not even a little bit.

“I got it from

a friend,” I stammered.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Soren said, his eyes slightly wider than usual, and his smile went away. “I didn’t mean to pry.”

“No, no, it’s okay,” I told him. “It’s fine. I’m just. I was just afraid that it was going to be taken when I was robbed, and I’m glad that it wasn’t.” While my excuse was true, it wasn’t anywhere near the entire story.

“I can absolutely understand that.” Soren stopped eating and looked at me. “However, no matter how valuable it is, it’s not as important as your own safety.”

He was right; I couldn’t argue with that.

However, it was the only bit of Ethan I had left, other than my memories.

Soren could tell I didn’t want to continue to talk about the necklace, so he concluded, “Well, no matter what has happened in your past, at least you know you’ll never be alone again.”

I stared at him for a moment a little nervously, not sure what he meant. Did he expect me to stay here forever?

“Nothing is more precious than the little life in you.”

He meant the baby. I laughed at myself for my overreaction.

“Right,” I said. “Of course.”

Soren laughed, too. He clearly read on my face what I was thinking.

“Hey, don’t get me wrong, I’d love to have you stay for longer. It’s nice to have such a beautiful... listener. But I also know life moves on. You’re welcome to visit me after you settle down.”

I was a little embarrassed, but I was glad to hear him talking about my eventual departure— not because I wanted to leave, but because it made me feel less dependent upon him.

“Soren, you’ve already helped me a lot. I don’t want to be a burden to you.”

“You’re not a burden, Ro. Anyone who could ever think of you as a burden needs to get their head checked. You’re a blessing. Just knowing you has enriched my life.”

I could hardly bear his genuine expression. “Well, I’ll do what I can to help you, Ro. Not only do I still feel awful for what happened to you, but now that I’ve gotten to know you, I feel like we’re friends, and I like to help my friends.”

He smiled at me, and I felt a warmth spread through me.

Yes, Soren was a good man. He was sweet and considerate, and he knew how to treat the ones he cared about well.

But how could I be around someone who constantly made me think of Ethan?

“I appreciate it,” I replied softly, as a polite guest would say.

“Great! I’m gonna be around for a few days. Maybe we can hang out together, get to know each other a little better. If you feel up to it.”

I looked at his sincere smile and found myself in no position to say no.

“I think I’d like that.”

#### Chapter 64 Push Ethan Out of My Mind

The following days after the dinner, Soren was in the house more often than before. However, he still seemed to be working in the study or on phone calls most of the time.

Meanwhile, I had been busy reading the books Lola dropped off.

Or, in other words... I had been busy keeping myself busy.

“The Isles of Denali consist of over a hundred small islands, many of which have their own unique culture...”

“...Although the islands do not have as abundant natural resources as the East continent, their comfortable climate, variety of sea products, and unique cultures still make them one of the best choices for those who are seeking a peaceful and relaxing lifestyle. They hold special appeal for those who are from the far deserts of the *West* continent...”

I was flipping through the travel magazine on my warm cozy bed under the morning sun when I heard a knock on the door again.

“Come in.” I called out softly, expecting to see Lola. She normally dropped off breakfast for me around this hour.

However, no one opened the door.

I waited for a few more seconds and decided to check who was out there. I opened the door and came face-to-face with Soren’s bright smile.

“Good morning, Ro.” He paused, as if he was trying to find a way to phrase what he wanted to say. “I happened to just be passing by, and thought to myself, ‘Maybe I should check on her. I just need a good excuse.’”

He always had a way of starting fun conversations, I reflected.

I looked at him with a smile and said nothing, knowing he was going to continue talking anyway.

He rubbed the back of his neck and shrugged with a smile. “It took me like ten minutes to get the courage to knock. Then I kinda forgot about my excuse.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “Do you remember now?”

“Oh—” he replied with a jokey grin, “I was thinking about starting with, ‘I don’t want her to starve,’ so I was about to bring you everything from the kitchen. But then I thought maybe it wasn’t good for you to start your day with anything greasy, so finally I settled on bringing you this special blueberry jam.”

He held up a glass jar, and I could smell the delicious blueberry scent even without the lid open.

“So,” he continued in an exaggerated tone of voice that once again made me smile openly, “if you haven’t had breakfast yet, I highly recommend giving it a try. It’s a secret island recipe. The berries are from here, picked with love.”

The jar itself was shaped like a cute bear, and it reminded me of the person who had just gifted it to me. No one could resist something adorable like that, so I accepted my newest gift from Soren as he handed it over to me.

Sometimes his silly sense of humor made me wonder how he managed to handle such a big island as an authoritative figure.

“You are just too kind. Um, would you like to come in?” I figured that was the appropriate thing to ask.

“I was just wondering when are you going to ask me that.”

He blinked a few times, but his lighthearted tone assured me that it was safe to be alone with him.

He took a seat on a chair across the room, keeping a safe distance between us. “How do you feel today?”

While he didn’t have a smile on his face, his tone was gentle.

“I feel great. I really appreciate your kindness in letting me stay here.”

“My pleasure.”

He smiled. Then he noticed the open magazine on the bed, and exclaimed, “So I was right!”

I was confused, "About what?"

"I was thinking the other day that you must be so bored by now, but the doctor had ordered you to take it easy. I was wondering what might help you to kill time. See, I just had the feeling that you love to read!" He looked proud of himself. "And I was right!"

I smiled. "You weren't just right, it was as if you read my mind. Lola dropped them off just as I was thinking about reading."

"Ha, I am good like that!" he said grandly, and I replied with an agreeing chuckle.

He got up and paced over to the window, gesturing toward that part of the room. "I'll have them add a lounge chair here so that, if you want to sit up to read, you'll have a place in your room to do so."

His back was to the sun, and his face was darkened by the shadow. I could only see his overall silhouette.

For a moment, I thought it was Ethan speaking to me.

"...what do you think, Ro?"

I sighed inwardly. What was wrong with me?

Soren was not Ethan. No matter how similar they looked, he was opposite the Alpha of Drogomor in every way.

For example, Ethan would never ask my opinion of anything.

I looked up to him to answer his question. "Soren, please do whatever you think is the best. This is your home."

"But this is your room-"

I sighed. "Soren, I appreciate your help. Really, without you, I can't even bear to think what might have happened to me and my baby..."

Thad made up my mind. The sooner I left here, the better.

I could not allow myself to rely on someone else any more... especially someone who looked so much like Ethan.

"...However, I cannot stay here forever."

No matter how nice Soren seemed to be, I did not need another man in my life.

The smile on his face had faded away, as if he was disappointed at my answer. But my mind was set. I could not allow myself to be trapped with anyone else.

If I could run away from Ethan, I was sure I could escape Soren.

He didn't pressure me further, simply nodding in understanding. "What a pity. I've really enjoyed your company. In that case. Do you know where you would like to go? Have you picked out a neighborhood? What kind of job would you like to have?"

Alright. I had to admit that I haven't fully thought through everything.

"I used to be a waitress and a singer in restaurants, but I could also work as a maid, babysitter..."

"Hmm...waitress and singer." He was more serious than a few moments before. "Let me talk to my assistant. How about this, either way, you are supposed to take it easy for at least another two weeks. Why don't we use this time to figure out a solid plan for you?"

I looked at Soren's sincere gaze and felt guilty.

The entire time I was with him, he was nothing but helpful and respectful. Was I unreasonable for being so suspicious?

"Thank you, Soren," I said with all my heart. "I will find a way to repay you."

"You are too serious. This is what I am supposed to do— I look out for everyone on this island."

Soren gave my hand a couple of gentle pats, and then stood back up.

"Hey, no tears. You're going to ruin my reputation as a gentleman. I'm NOT a heartbreaker!" He winked as he said this, successfully defeating my urge to cry.

Once I had a smile back on my face, he asked, "Would you honor me with a walk?"

After all his kindness, I didn't want to refuse him. "I would love to."

He offered me his arm. "You're with child right now, so let's be one-hundred-percent cautious in those shoes."

I hesitated for a moment before looping my hand around his elbow.

After a short moment of silence, I decided to be the one to start the conversation. "It's rare to see you not working."

"Believe me, I would love to take more breaks if I could. But I'm really glad I didn't the other day, otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to be the hero of a beautiful young lady."

Knowing this was just who he was, I smiled.

Soren led me through a back door. The second we walked outside and the sunlight hit me directly in the face, felt my mood change. A light breeze stirred my hair, and I paused for a second to raise my face to the bright azure sky.

It was my favorite color, for it was the color of Ethan's eyes.

Stopping alongside me, Soren let out a little chuckle. "It's been a while since you've been outside, huh?" he said.

I looked at him. Soren looked so much like Ethan.

Thad hoped that after leaving, I would be able to let Ethan go. However, fate found a way to always remind me of him.

"Yeah, I guess so," I admitted, opening my eyes. I felt my cheeks heating up with embarrassment at my behavior.

"You're so adorable," he muttered, and I felt like he was talking more to himself than to me, so I didn't comment.

"Come on," he added. "I have something to show you."

I walked with him, my arm still through his so I didn't trip. He led me to a little wooden gate, and a sweet floral fragrance told me where we were going well before we got there.

Soren pushed open the quaint wooden, round-topped gate with chipped, white paint, and we walked into a large garden.

I couldn't help but gasp at how beautiful it was. Flowers in every color bloomed alongside the cobblestone walking paths.

I immediately understood where he got all of the flowers he brought me and why they were always different. The flowers that grew here were not all tropical, either. Many of them grew on the mainland.

They were all beautiful. Their petals danced in the breeze, and their fragrances mingled together.

It was enchanting, and for a moment, I stopped to savor the image. I felt like I'd stepped inside the pages of a book—a fairy tale.

"Do you like it?" he asked me.

Perhaps I simply hadn't been outside in a while, and my emotions were running wild, but I felt tears threatening to dampen my cheeks.

“I love it,” I told him.

“I’m so happy to hear it,” he said. “Let’s keep walking. There’s a fountain I’d like to show you.”

We walked along, arm in arm, and he told me about some of the flowers. We also talked about day-to-day activities.

“Here it is,” Soren said as we rounded the corner, and the sound of trickling water became even louder.

We were standing outside of a beautiful fountain, where two chubby cherubs were splashing water at one another. It was a cute fountain, and I adored it.

It wasn’t nearly as large and fancy as the ornamental fountains in the capital, though.

For a moment, my mind went to Ethan again. I wondered what he would say, standing next to a fountain featuring a couple of winged babies splashing each other. He would probably just grunt and have nothing else to say about it.

But that didn’t make me miss him any less.

“Do you want to have a seat?” Soren asked, gesturing to a bench nearby.

Sure,” I said, pushing Ethan out of my mind.

I knew he wouldn’t completely go away, though. He never did.

I was thinking, it might be a good idea for you to have

We sat, and Soren waited a moment before asking, “So a midwife.”

I turned and looked at him. “A midwife? Now?” I was thinking of leaving soon.

“Yes, that’s right. I have connections all over the island, and if you’re still thinking of moving out on your own soon, I want to make sure you have the very best midwife to care for you and the baby.”

I stared at him for a moment, not sure what to say.

Soren chuckled. “Don’t look so surprised, Ro. You know I care about you and that little bundle you’re carrying,

right? The more time we spend together, the more I feel that way. I want to make sure that you’re well looked after, no matter where you are. So... can I help you find a good midwife? It means a lot to me.”

How could I possibly deny him that?

“Of course, Soren.” I smiled up at him. “Thank you so much—for everything.”

“It’s my pleasure, Ro.” He squeezed my arm gently. “At first, I thought I was just helping a young girl who’d been injured, but now I know what we have here is so much more. Ro, I’m beginning to count you as a friend.”

A friend—I felt a pang of guilt about him calling me that.

“I hope that I will not let you down,” I sighed.

“How could you?” he chuckled, seeming to think that I was just being funny or humble.

I didn’t dare look into his smiling eyes, and turned my gaze to the fountain instead. How I wished I could be the innocent “me” again and simply trust a dear friend.

## Chapter 65: I Miss You

\*\*Lilly’s POV

“It’s all right, honey,” my mother said, smoothing my hair. “We’ll be alright. Just stay quiet for a bit longer, and then the wolves upstairs will go, and we’ll be safe.”

I looked up at my mother and nodded, but wasn’t sure I believed her. We had run down here, my older brother, my mother, and I, about an hour ago, when we’d first gotten word from the village guard that there were unknown wolves spotted in the woods near our homes. Some of the other villages nearby had been attacked recently, so we’d been on high alert. None of us had slept for the last few nights.

We’d heard that there were more warriors on the way to protect us, but so far, we hadn’t seen any.

Upstairs, the floor creaked, and some glass broke. I held my breath, terrified.

I thought about all of my friends from school. Would I even be there tomorrow? *We* were supposed to have our seventh–grade assessments.

It should’ve been the last thing on my mind.

“We should shift, Mom. Me and you need to be in our wolf forms,” whispered my older brother, Blake, who was twenty–two. “We need to be ready to run!”

My mother hesitated, but I wasn’t sure why. Then, when we heard the weight of paws closer to the door that led downstairs, she nodded.

But before she shifted herself, she carefully lifted the cover to the vent next to us. It was our only chance of getting out undetected.

She had an emergency bag she could scoop up and put on her back as a wolf.

We could only hope that our father, who had volunteered to help with the village guard, would be okay, and we could meet up with him again somewhere down the line.

“You run south, as fast as you can,” my mother instructed my brother. “Put Lily on your back, and do not look back. For anything,” she told both of us, looking us each in the eye.

We both nodded. I knew that she’d be able to talk to Blake using the mind-link once he shifted, but it wasn’t the

same.

As quietly as he could, Blake shifted into his wolf form. I was surprised when I saw my mom gesture for me to pick up the backpack. I did as I was told, and Blake went first through the vent to the tunnel that led out of the basement. My mom nudged me to go next just as we heard more breaking glass and the sound of the door at the top of the stairs.

Using the mind-link, my mom shouted, “Run! Run kids, run!”

Blake and I ran through the tunnel. I kept my eyes on his tail. There was no room for me to get on his back down here. He came out of the forest ahead of me. He stopped as soon as we got out, and I climbed on top of him. I kept my eyes trained on the forest ahead of us, my big brother running as fast as he could as the sounds of shouting and howling filled our ears. I remembered what my mom said, and I didn’t look back. But I wanted to.

Because I didn’t hear her behind us.

“I miss you.”

“Oh, how I miss you, too,” I said, running my hand along Rosalie’s soft cheek. “I miss you so much.

We were lying in bed, and she was in my arms, her head on my bicep, her eyes dancing as she smiled up at me.

“I wish this was real, and we were together again.” Her voice was so soft and sultry. It was just a whisper in the wind.

And that’s how I knew it wasn’t real.

These dreams – or rather, nightmares – always started the same way. I knew that in a few moments, she wouldn’t be lying here anymore, lovingly gazing at my face anymore.

No, in a moment, she'd be screaming.

She'd be falling.

The ironic thing is, when she fell, she didn't scream at all. I never heard a sound from her.

Maybe if she had screamed, if she'd called me a b\*stard, if she'd let out some sort of wail of anguish, this would've all been easier.

"You want me to stay, don't you?" she asked, pushing up so that she was hovering near my lips.

I didn't answer her. I never answered her.

If I did... maybe she wouldn't go away.

But I couldn't. It was as if my tongue no longer worked.

"Ethan? Don't you love *me*?" Rosalie's eyebrows furrowed, and she stared at me more intently for a moment until *we* were no longer on the bed.

*We* were on the cliffside. And I was too far away from her.

I couldn't reach her.

"Don't you want me?" she asked. "Don't you love me?"

Still, I could not answer, and then, just like always, her arms came out. She reached for me, but I couldn't reach her. Then her mouth – that beautiful mouth which produced all those perfect, calming melodies that always soothed my soul – flew open, and she was screaming.

An ear-piercing, shrill, banshee-like scream hit my ears before she was hurled over the side of the cliff.

Just like that, she was gone.

In a flicker

The bat of an eyelash,

Rosalie disappeared, and I was standing there, shouting after her, "NO!"

Beep, beep, beep...

The sound of my alarm made me bolt up, my heart racing, a cold sweat covering me. I quickly hit the butto

stop that awful noise, though it wasn't nearly as unsettling as the sound of Rosalie's nightmarish scream that still echoed in my head.

I dropped back onto my pillows, waiting for my heart to recover before I pulled myself out of bed.

I'd just come here to lie down for a few minutes before I went back to work. Normally, I didn't even fall asleep whenever I came back to my room to rest, but clearly today I had.

I wished I hadn't.

Dragging my hand down my face, I sat back up, remembering that I had work to do. The attacks on the villages in the northern forests continued. Just because I had had a bad dream didn't mean I could lie there and wallow in self-pity.

I pushed my feet back into my shoes and went into the bathroom to splash some water onto my face.

ome

In the mirror, the man that stared back at me was a stranger.

My face was thinner than I'd ever remembered seeing it before. I had heavy, dark bags under my eyes, and even though I'd shaved earlier in the day, I hadn't done a very careful job of it. I couldn't recognize myself.

A knock at the door drew me out of the bathroom.

Talon looked at me with worry. "Alpha, are you okay? Did you get to sleep at all?"

"Yes, I'm fine. What's up?"

"They're here!"

At first, I wasn't sure who he was talking about. My Beta didn't seem panicked enough to mean that the enemy's wolves had shown up at our gates.

Then I remembered. The witness brought useful information from the borders, and we were able to send help to rescue the citizens being attacked by the rogues. Some of them come to the capital seeking shelter.

Talon and Vicky had both been very busy trying to put together the resources to help the people who were coming in.

Up until yesterday, none of the transport vehicles had arrived yet, though.

“They’re here?” I repeated, staring at Talon. “Finally, some good news.”

“King James is out near the gate, greeting them as they come in,” Talon said, an expectant look on his face. “Vicky is with him and a few others.”

“That doesn’t surprise me,” I said, returning my gaze to the map.

Talon cleared his throat. Frustrated, I looked back at him. “Yes?”

“He wants you there as well.”

Sighing, I placed both hands on my desk and leaned forward, knowing I didn’t have time for this. I had more important things to do than greet the displaced citizens as they came into the capital. Yes, I felt bad for them, but my time was better spent trying to figure out why the villages were being burned and the people were being killed

“It will have to be quick.” I growled as I walked out from behind my desk.

The two of us headed out to where the transport vehicles were coming through the gate, letting the citizens out.

Vicky and several other people, mostly women but not all, were telling the refugees where to go.

As soon as I saw them, the emotions I’d felt inside changed. The frustration was still there, but it morphed, mingling with the anger and twisting around with another emotion I rarely acknowledged.

I felt bad for these people. They had been displaced from their homes. Some of them were wounded. All of them were scared. Most of them were dirty and some had bloodstains on their clothes. A few were crying.

It was a sobering, heartbreaking sight that made me want to personally hunt down the culprits so that I could rip their hearts out and shove them down their throats.

“What’s your name, honey?” I heard Vicky asking a dark-haired girl. She was standing with a tall, lanky boy who was probably only a few years older than her. They looked similar, so I imagined they were siblings.

“My name is Lilly,” she said, tears streaking her cheeks. “This is my brother. Blake.”

“We can’t find our parents,” Blake said. His bottom lip was quivering as he spoke. I knew that face. He was trying to stay strong, to show his sister he wasn’t afraid, but on the inside, he was terrified.

The girl, Lilly, wiped at her tears. “Our father was in the village guard. He might be dead.”

Vicky pulled the little girl into a hug.

“Try not to think the worst, sweetheart,” she said. “I know it’s scary. But you’re safe now, and there are a lot of people here to help take care of you.”

Vicky’s voice was sweet, calming. For a moment, it reminded me of Rosalie, and I wished that she was here. If she could sing for these children for just a moment, they would feel so much better.

She wasn’t here, though. It was pointless for me to let my mind go there.

“Ethan.” James’s voice cut through my inner thoughts. He was pacing next to me. “What are we going to do about this?”

“We’re sending in help from adjacent areas,” I said, “but we need to continue the evacuation of the northern villages. With the war going on, we have limited men to spare there.”

James nodded. “We need to make sure that we have all of the resources necessary to take care of the citizens once they arrive here in the capital.” As the King, his priority was to ensure the citizens were settled down.

Talon replied, “We have secured public locations for them to stay in—event centers, chapels, those sorts of places.”

“Good.”

Before the king walked away, he signaled me to follow him.

Once we were in private, he looked me in the eye.

“Ethan, what’s your plan with Soren?”

## **Chapter 66 Little Love Birds**

James’ question caught me off guard. “What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean,” he sighed. “Talon took the witness away to talk to him in private the other day. Why?”

“Because the man was overwhelmed by all the people in the room,” I explained.

“By all the people, or by you?”

I knew there was no point in arguing about it. Not only because James was a competent king, but also because he knew me well— he knew us well.

I sighed and looked away. “One person’s word wouldn’t have been enough to leap to any conclusions. I didn’t want to cause panic or suspicion in the room.”

“I understand that. That’s why I didn’t say anything there.”

“I appreciate it.”

“What are you going to do about it?” James asked.

“This is between me and him,” I said quietly.

“It might just be personal before, but now, as you are aware, things are not going well in our border packs. The people are suffering. This troubles me.”

He looked towards the crowd of the displaced civilians. Worry and sadness were in his gaze. I understood his concern for his kingdom and his people, our people.

| softened my voice. “I’ll take care of it.”

James looked me in the eye quietly, and he nodded, “Good, I’m sure you will.”

Soren took a sip of wine. “So, Ro, I’ve talked to my assistant about referring you to a job. But we almost overlooked something important.”

I put down my silverware and waited for him to continue. Having dinner with Soren had become much easier and more pleasant now that I’d gotten to know him better.

“What was it?”

“You’re pregnant.” Soren pointed out. “Any of the jobs you mentioned could require you to carry weight, and you would be on your feet all the time. *Are* you sure it’s the best for your baby?”

I couldn’t answer. I might *have* oversimplified the process of “settling down” in my head, especially since I had lost all of the money and valuables.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “I didn’t mean to make you feel bad. I was just trying to be thorough.”

“This is not your fault, I didn’t think it through.” I murmured.

“Oh, on the bright side, talking about pregnancy—I do have good news,” he chirped, clearly trying to cheer me up. “Want to guess?”

| smiled, but shook my head.

“I had posted a job ad for a midwife, and we’ve gotten quite a few applicants, and,”

He paused intentionally, and seemingly waited for me to ask him what he was holding off.

T held my breath and replied in disbelief, “You found her?”

He grinned, and finished, “one of the applicants is named Seraphine.”

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I immediately recognized the face that I hadn’t expected to see again so soon. Seraphine stood with a bright smile across her lips, her eyes locking with mine, and I could tell she was happy to see me, too.

A few days ago, Soren offered to find me a midwife. I told him about Seraphine and that I had lost her address along with my other belongings. With Soren’s help, we posted the job ad in the local newspaper, and now.. here *we* were.

I walked around and gave Seraphine a warm embrace. “I missed you, Seraphine!”

“So glad to see you again dear.” She replied, we will need to get you set up for an appointment very soon, that *way*, *we* can see how the baby is doing.”

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“The heartbeat sounds very strong today,” Seraphine said, holding a stethoscope to my stomach.

*We* were sitting on the edge of my bed, in one of the rooms that had been furnished already when I’d moved into the cottage a few days earlier.

I loved to hear the baby’s heartbeat myself, so once Seraphine had finished listening and confirmed that everything was well, she handed me the stethoscope so that I could hear.

Theld the bottom of the stethoscope against my abdomen, which was growing larger by the day, it seemed. The thunk, thunk sound of my baby’s heart reverberated like a drum in my ears and brought a smile to my face.

“Oh, it sounds so fast today,” | said with a grin.

“It’s about the same as yesterday,” Seraphine assured me, writing down some notes. She kept a careful record of everything that had to do with the baby. “Just a tiny bit faster. That’s fine. It can vary.”

“What would cause that?” I asked.

“It could be a lot of things.” She looked around the room and noticed the breakfast tray Lola had yet to remove. “Oh, well, I see you’ve had some more of Soren’s famous blueberry jam. That could be it.”

My eyes widened. “Is that not good for the baby?”

It’s perfectly fine. It just has sugar in it, and it can make the baby a little more active than normal for a little while.” She patted my shoulder and laughed a little. “No need to worry. Your baby will be fine, Ro.”

I tried to relax, but I had to wonder if I should start cutting all sugar out of my diet, just in case it wasn’t good for my child.

“You’re going to be such a good mother,” Seraphine said, finishing her notes and standing to put her medical

equipment back in her bag. I knew that meant she was going to take her stethoscope away, and that meant that I was going to have to stop listening to that tiny drum in my ears.

“Listen to you later, tiny peanut,” I whispered as I gave Seraphine her stethoscope.

As she put it away, I said to her, “Thank you, but why do you say that?”

“Because you care so much about all of the little details.” She turned and grinned at me over her shoulder as she zipped her bag.

A warm feeling radiated throughout my body as I thought about what it would be like to have my baby here and hold him or her in my arms. I liked to think about rocking the baby, holding that tiny person in my arms, wrapped

in a blanket, kissing that little head... I would do anything for them.

Treally didn’t care if it was a boy or a girl, though imagining a little boy that looked like his father would make me happy.

As delicious as the blueberry jam was, I didn’t mind not eating it for the next few months. Or any sugar, for that matter.

Before I could respond, Lola came into the room. “Miss Ro, Mr. Soren is here to see you.”

I got up off of the bed and walked past Seraphine. She was still packing up, but she looked at me curiously.

I paused and gave Seraphine a hug, “Thank you for coming over today. See you in a few days.”

She laughed, spared one hand to wave at me. “See you around. Enjoy your date, you little love birds.”

I froze. “No, no! It’s not like that,” I tried to explain.

“Okay, okay, I know,” she said, but her expression told me that she didn’t.

I sighed. Soren was charming and he treated me very sweetly, he treated everyone sweetly.

However, I wasn’t ready for any kind of relationship. Soren was well aware of this as well. He told me that he was glad we were friends.

However, Seraphine didn’t buy that.

By the time I got to the front door, Soren was standing in the hallway, a bouquet of daisies in his hand.

“Good morning!” he said, his smile so cheerful that it immediately made my steps feel lighter.

“Good morning, Soren.”

He extended the flowers to me. “These are for you.”

“Thank you,” I said, taking them and lifting them to my nose to inhale their fragrance. “They smell wonderful.”

I had gotten used to him bringing me something every time he came over. Most of the time it was flowers, but sometimes it was chocolates, or something else thoughtful to make me feel better after the attack.

I was mostly healed now. Seraphine said she’d never seen anyone heal so quickly before, but I had always been fast to recover from injuries, so I guessed I was just lucky.

“You are most welcome, beautiful lady.” I had gotten used to his compliments to girls, all girls. “What are your plans today?”

Lola came to take the flowers from me to put them in a vase of water. She knew my routines by now and expected to need a fresh vase if Mr. Soren was visiting.

Once I handed her the flowers, I turned back to face him.

“Well, I was intending to spend some time in the garden and possibly do some light exercise, but... nothing is set in stone.” I assumed he had something in mind if he was asking. “Are you not out for work today?”

Soren shook his head. “I was supposed to have a business meeting, but it got canceled, so I wonder whether you have any interest in doing a little shopping with me?”

My face lit up. I had been wanting to get some yarn to do crocheting. “You sure it wouldn’t take up too much of your time?”

“I wouldn’t offer if I didn’t mean it.”

“In that case, yes, I would love to. Thank you.” I smiled at Soren, who offered me his arm.

I hesitated. From the corner of my eye, I saw Seraphine step out of the room. She smiled when she saw us and gave me a “see, I knew it” look.

I shook my head, pretended I didn’t see his slightly arched arm, and looked up to Soren, “Let’s go. I will follow

you.”

Chapter 67 Derek Again!

“You almost bought the entire store. That’s too much!”

I exited the store following Soren, who had insisted on buying anything and everything that I looked at for more than three seconds.

“This is just the right amount.” Soren smiled. “I feel good about myself today. Very wise choice.”

“I’m sorry?” I said, honestly not understanding.

“The best thing I did today was making these purchases. First of all, you are happy. Secondly, the old lady behind the counter made enough to call it a day early, so she is happy. I made two ladies happy in one day, nothing beats that!”

He thought for a moment before happily continuing, “Even the baby will thank me when it gets the new things created by its mother.”

I chuckled at his words, and my hand gently moved to my belly. I shook my head with a smile.

“Thank you, Mr. Wiseman Soren. I promise I’ll pay you back once I find a job.”

He slowed down to look at me, ignoring half of what I said. “You’re welcome.” He glanced at his watch. “It’s still early. Ro, do you still have energy to check out the rest of the marketplace?”

It was the first time in a long while that I had a chance to enjoy crowds and shops like this, and there was still a lot to see.

I nodded. “Yes, that would be lovely.”

The marketplace stretched from the cobbled stone streets near the port all the way down to the bakery on the corner. Stalls were lined up in the streets with farmers selling their fresh produce

out in the open fresh air. The cheerful shops on either side attracted customers with food, jewelry, and apparel.

Exciting scents and sounds surrounded me- the sweet earthy smells of roasting chestnuts and mouth watering baked goods; the chatter of adults and laughing shrieks of children amidst the loud calls and haggling of the vendors. Somewhere down an alley, a fiddler was playing a cheerful folk tune.

It was almost like I had been dropped into another universe. The clothes, the accents, the atmosphere everything was so different from what I was used to on the mainland.

“So are you enjoying the shops here?” Soren asked with a smile.

Caught up in the bliss of beauty that was Avondale, I found it hard to take my eyes off everything around me. “Yes, I can’t get over how lively this place is. It’s so different from what I’m used to.”

His chuckle was light. “It is spectacular, in its own way. Avondale is the biggest port of trade in the Denali Isles. I suppose I don’t notice the beauty of it much anymore since I’ve been here for a while.”

I watched the interactions of the people around me, and the children who laughed and played in the street. I could picture myself and my child walking along these streets, enjoying a carefree afternoon walk in the warm sun.

“Hey Ro, I want to check out something over there,” Soren said beside me. “Do you mind checking out the next

couple stalls by yourself?”

“Of course. Please go ahead.”

“Alright, be a good girl and don’t cause any trouble, okay?” he joked. “I’ll be right back.”

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“I promise I’ll be here when you’re back.” I smiled as he took off to go to the other side of the street.

I was standing in front of a clothing store. My belly was growing bigger every day, and I was in need of more comfortable items to wear. I felt a strong urge to see what the store had to offer, and ventured closer in hopes of finding something. The beautiful array of fabric and the variety of colors were eye-catching, making it difficult to pick out what I might need the most.

As I was checking out a set of clothes on the rack just outside the shop door, I suddenly froze.

On the other side of the street, I caught a glimpse of someone from my nightmares of long ago— a dark shadow of my past I thought I had escaped from.

He wasn't facing the store, and I could only see his profile, but I couldn't mistake him.

"That isn't possible..." The whisper barely left my lips. "Derek..."

I wasn't sure if he had seen me, but that wasn't a risk I was willing to take.

T headed into the shop as quickly as I could without drawing attention to myself, and pushing past a few people in order to meander toward the back. Luckily, with the bright sunshine outside, it would be hard for anyone to see into the store. I moved behind racks of clothing and prayed that Derek wouldn't see me.

My heart was beating fast. What should I do?

I thought of Soren. He hadn't returned yet, and even if he did, how would he know I was here?

As I was trying to figure out my next move, someone blocked the store's entrance.

"Ro," Soren's voice called out, causing me to jump.

I let out a breath. I had never been so happy that he was around.

As soon as he saw me, his look of happiness quickly turned into one of concern. "You're here! Is everything

okay?"

I found myself speechless for a moment, and forced a smile onto my face.

"Uh—yes. Sorry, I should've waited outside. How did you find me?"

"Not a problem at all. I would be able to find you anywhere," he replied jokingly. "In all honesty, you, my lady, have definitely made some good impressions, so it wasn't too difficult for the stall owners to tell me which way you went. So, did you find anything?"

Flattered by his compliment, I shyly said. "You are far too kind." Then I cleared my throat quickly, trying to pretend nothing had happened, and answered, "Yes, but I was having difficulties deciding which one of these two dresses I should buy."

"That's easy." He smiled, and I had a feeling that he would say,

"Both of them, of course. One moment— let me check them out."

I sighed. Just as expected.

However, I didn't argue with him.

I glanced outside again. Thank the Moon Goddess, Derek was gone.

Soren returned with yet another bag in hand.

"Thank you so much," I said with a smile— but my happy expression faltered quickly as my eyes instinctively darted around.

My mind was drifting back to Derek. Would he also be able to track me down easily if he saw me?

Soren, observant as he was, didn't miss my nervousness. "You seem uncomfortable. Would you like to head back?"

Nodding my head, I gave a weak smile. "I'm sorry, just a bit tired now. I'm looking forward to sitting down once we get back."

"You don't have to apologize, Ro. Growing a child can't be an easy thing to do."

I followed him back to his limousine. His Beta, Thomas, was already waiting for us. Fortunately, Derek was still nowhere to be seen.

Once we got in the car, I let out a breath and tried to calm myself down.

Noticing Soren was looking at me, I cleared my throat. "So did you find what you were looking for earlier?"

"It's a secret." He blinked twice at me, and successfully lightened my mood.

But before I replied, he said, "gosh, I'm just so bad at keeping secrets! So I got something for you—" I watched him reaching into a large white bag, "well something for your baby, to be accurate."

My eyes widened at the sight of an elegant black toy ship that Soren had presented in his hand. It was about the length of my forearm, fairly large compared to most of the toy ships, but was sophisticatedly decorated in the most realistic way.

On its body, there were engraved letters reading "Avondale".

"Soren, it's beautiful," I whispered as he placed it in my hands. "You didn't—"

"I know, I know. I didn't have to, but I wanted to. I figured that, since you are living on the island, a ship named after it would be a great representation of where your child will be growing up."

I forced a smile and thanked him. “You are too generous. Thank you!”

Soren’s gift was heartwarming.

However, knowing Derek was also here made Avondale no longer an option for me to settle down long term.

I was the reason he’d lost his hand. If he ever found me, I couldn’t imagine what he would do to me and my child for revenge. An overwhelming fear flooded me at the thought.

Soren asked all of a sudden, “Ro, something happened back at the market, didn’t it?”

I sighed. I was a little taken aback by his question, but then I wasn’t too surprised that he came to that conclusion— he was extremely good at reading people.

However, I didn’t want to burden Soren with my troubles. And I couldn’t let him find out who I was.

“Soren.. no, nothing. You have been amazing with everything, but now that I am fully healed, I think it’s time for me to find a place to settle down.”

It took Soren a moment, but he said in an even tone, “I actually was thinking about that these couple days. I

promised you we’ll figure out a solid plan for you. Let’s get inside, and we can talk it through.”

As we spoke, the limousine pulled up to the house. Soren opened the car door for me and led me to the living room.

After pouring me a cup of warm water, he sat down next to me to explain his proposal in detail.

“I have a property on a different island within the Isles of Denali. As you know, I go on business trips a lot, so I’m not there most of the time. I’m looking for someone to look after it. Someone I could trust.”

He gave me a minute to digest the information.

“It’s a small island, not as busy as Avondale, so I wasn’t sure whether you’d like it there. But I figured I’d at least ask you and see if you had any interest.”

To make the offer even more appealing, he added with a smile and a wink, “Also, I pay well. You can be assured of that.”

My eyes widened. It seemed like a perfect solution to my problem.

“If you accept, it would be a huge favor to me.” Soren gave me a sincere look.

I didn’t want to jump on the opportunity just yet. Even though everything had seemed to work out really well so far, I just had an uneasy feeling.

“Thank you so much for the offer. May I think about it?”

“Absolutely!” Soren seemed to be happy that I didn’t turn him down immediately. I realized I forgot to ask for a piece of important information. “What’s the name of the island?” “It’s Papeno.”

Which Island is being used by Our Enemy?

The river was running particularly fast that night as I stood there gazing out at it under the moonlight.

I knew I didn’t have long. I needed to get back soon. But I had snuck out to catch some fresh air.

At least, that’s what I had told everyone.

I had fully intended to do just that, but now I found myself here— standing on the cliff’s edge, staring down at the water. I watched it run over the top of the jagged rocks, white caps violently cascading over the brink before they disappeared on the other side.

Sometimes a branch would fly up into the air, smash into a boulder, and then fall beneath the surface, fading away, never to be seen again.

I couldn’t let myself think of her that —

*way.*

I couldn’t let my mind go there... to the images of what it would be like for her body to hit those rocks and break apart like those sticks.

It had been days, and still nothing. As I looked down at the water and saw how vicious it was, the idea that it could destroy all traces of her made it easier to accept.

AIFINA!

Talon’s voice cut through my thoughts, and I turned to see him hurrying toward me.

“The King needs us in the war room right away!”

Ever since we counterattacked against the rogues and evacuated the northern villages, the situation along the northern forest had been stabilized. We had now focused back on the west coast war against the West King, Alpha Kal.

Talon's voice told me, though, that this was more urgent than usual.

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I turned and looked at him, his face illuminated by the moon's light, and took several hurried steps in his direction. "What is it?"

"Kal's men have taken over three cities along the west coast," he said.

I froze. "Sorry?"

"You heard me correctly." Talon's expression could not have made it more clear that the bad news was true.

I took a deep breath. "Why haven't we heard about this until now?"

Talon shook his head. "They were too fast," he explained.

We rushed back to the war room.

"The last attack happened a few hours ago," Talon said, "Here." He picked up a marker and made another X.

I looked at the pattern of Xs.

"The patrol didn't catch wind of them at all along the coast?" James asked, standing up and surveying the map from a different angle. "It doesn't make any sense. Where could they possibly be starting from to get to our mainland so quickly?"

We were all looking at the large map he had spread on the table in the war room. It was the main map we used to chart movements of all kinds: troops, resources, attacks, withdrawals—everything.

"The closest point of Alpha Kal's territory is here," Walter, James's advisor, said, touching the map in one spot. "It's far enough away that we should have seen his forces coming, one would think. He would have to use ships to get there, and we have ours in the open water here." He gestured toward our navy vessels indicated on the map.

James nodded. "Yes, I know, Walter," He said it with less cynicism in his voice than I would've been able to muster, "That's why I don't understand how enemy troops keep flooding into our territories without giving us any indication that they're coming."

"Unless."

I paused, studying the map.

A pang hit me in the stomach, one I didn't want to acknowledge, but it was there nonetheless. I didn't even want to say the words aloud in front of so many people, particularly if I was wrong.

My cousin looked at me for a second, an eyebrow arched. "What is it, Ethan?" he asked.

I cleared my throat. Deciding it was better not to say what I was thinking in the larger group, I changed track.

"Unless we figure out what he's doing.. we are going to continue to lose the battles."

I saw James and the others deflate, as if they had hoped I was on to something.

"Yes, that's true," James said.

We continued to study the map for several moments, but no one had any ideas.

The more I looked at it, the more I realized my gut instinct had to be right. There really was only one possibility of where the enemy troops could be launching from.

The notion made a white-hot fire burn within me.

However, regardless of how I felt inside, I had to stay calm in front of everyone.

"It's getting late," James finally said a bit after midnight. Our definitions of what "getting late" meant had changed now that we were at war. "Let's convene again at first light and see if a few hours of sleep have left any of us inspired."

The others nodded and headed for the door. I hung back.

Once the other leaders had all left the room, I turned to my cousin and said, "I hope that I'm wrong, but I think I know where they must be launching from."

James studied my face for a moment. "I thought you had an idea earlier. Why didn't you share it with us?"

"I'll get to that in a moment," I replied. Leaning over the map, I said, "What's the only place on this map that's west of our naval patrols and east of the coast of the West Kingdom?"

I could see, in my cousin's face, the same betrayal and anger beginning to well up inside of him as he pondered the possibility that what I was suggesting was true.

He stared at me for a moment before he replied, "The islands? But... aren't those part of Denali?"

I nodded. "Yes, they are."

“But if Alpha Kal is actually launching attacks from these islands, part of the Islands of Denali, he couldn’t be doing that without permission. Without Alpha Romero knowing about it, without his consent, without his... approval.”

“That’s right,” was all I could manage to spit out.

James was shaking his head. “But why—”

“Not that hard to guess.” Now that I’d gotten a few minutes to sort through the information, I was able to put myself in Romero’s shoes. “The Islands are in between us and Kal, and both sides need Romero’s help. Honestly, even now that we suspect him, there isn’t much we can do.”

From James’s expression, I knew he had followed my logic. “It’s not like we can force him to collaborate with us— just like Kal can’t force Romero, either.” James sighed. “So you think Romero is working with both sides?”

“Or at war with both sides, depending on how you look at it. But the bottom line is, it doesn’t matter which side wins—his islands will be spared and kept safe.”

I paused,

“However, I believe that he prefers for us to win the war.”

dn t need to provide the reasoning behind my theory, because James already got it. He finished what I didn’t

say: “...Otherwise, he wouldn’t push for the marriage between you and Madalynn.”

“I’ll need to figure out which island is being used by our enemy.” I tried to change the topic, but from James’ look, I knew what was in his mind.

No matter how hard I was trying to push it off, I knew he wouldn’t allow me this time.

“I need you to move forward with marrying Madalynn.”

I pressed my lips tight and didn’t answer.

His aging eyes turned to me, looking at me with pity. “Is this because of that girl... the breeder?”

I’d forbidden everyone from mentioning her, including myself. However, at the same time, all I wanted to hear was something, anything, about her. The conflicting feelings were making me lose my mind.

“I’m too busy with everything going on to deal with a wedding right now,” I deflected. “This war, and our people, need my full attention.”

“Is it so?” James looked at me quietly. “Ethan, don’t lie to yourself. And please don’t make me force you to do

this.”

The truth was... I could not bring myself to face Madalynn. Not yet.

I didn’t know how long it would take, but not yet– not right now.

Just like I couldn’t bring myself to forget about Rosalie.

“Ethan, whether you are still upset about that girl or not... what happened already happened. It’s a sad situation for a lot of people. From what I heard, she was a sweet woman. But I must ask you to move on from her and take charge of the future. Marry Madalynn, and produce an heir.”

Before I could reply, he held up his hand, stopping me in my tracks, and left the room by himself.

The conversation was done.

My head was about to explode. Tonight would be another sleepless night for me.

## Chapter 69 Accepting Her Death

“Alpha Ethan, great news! General Owen was able to hold the line of defense and retake one city along the coast!”

My eyes widened slightly. That was, indeed, good news.

“Does Talon know?”

“Not yet– I was about to go find him next.”

“I’ll do that. I need to ask him something, anyway.”

I stretched and stood up from my desk. It was still early–I didn’t mind walking a little bit.

As I neared Talon’s room, I noticed the door was ajar, and I heard his voice, along with Vicky’s. I’d never eavesdropped on my pack, but when I heard my name, I paused.

“...I know. He barely eats, he rarely sleeps any more,” Talon said.

“If Ethan knew about it, no matter how upset he is, maybe he could start to heal,” Vicky was saying.

Knew about what? What were they talking about?

“I don’t know, Vicky,” Talon said. “I couldn’t imagine how I would feel if it was me. You know that.”

She sighed. “I just want to help him.”

What the hell were they talking about?!

The only thing, the only one they were not supposed to mention in front of me was...

“Well, all we can do is be here for him and try to make the rest of his life easier.”

I started to walk again, but then I realized Vicky was crying, so I stopped again.

“I miss her so much,” she said between sobs.

“I know you do,” Talon said, and I could imagine him patting her back, trying to soothe her. “I do, too.”

“Rosalie was the sweetest, kindest person I’ve ever met in my whole life. It’s just not fair that she’s gone and that horrible Madalynn is still here.”

“We can’t question why these things happen, Vicky,” Talon said, in his logical tone.

“Why not?” his sister demanded. “Why can’t we question it? It sucks! I just wish... I wish...”

“I know,” he sighed. I assumed Vicky was going to say she wished she could see Rosalie one more time.

Because I wished I could see her one more time.

More than anything in the world.

But It had been so long since she’d disappeared over the edge of the cliffs, and still, nothing had surfaced.

I was just about to reveal that I was standing there when Vicky said something that made my blood run cold.

“If only we had said something to him—or if she had never overheard his plans,” Vicky said.

“Vicky, we’ve talked about this,” Talon said. “It’s too late now. Just let it go.”

“But don’t you feel responsible?” she asked. “If we had told Ethan that she knew—”

I braced myself against the wall, my head spinning, not wanting to let myself go to the place where my mind was slipping away to.

I refocused in time to hear Talon say, “I tried. He didn’t listen. I thought we had time to change his mind about that plan...”

Change my mind? A plan...?

Then it struck me. My plan! After everything that had happened, I barely even thought about it.

The plan that she would be put to death

by me.

My eyes widened

Had she known about it?!

Deciding I had heard enough, I entered the room. I was no longer capable of pretending like I hadn’t overheard them. I walked in with my teeth gritted together, my eyes seeing red.

Vicky gasped, and both of their faces blanched.

“Alpha,” Talon said. “We didn’t know—can we get you anything?”

“How did she know?” | spat each word out like a curse, slamming my hands down on the desk across from where they were sitting, my fingernails biting into the wood like tacks shot out of a nail gun.

Talon held his hands out in front of him, defensively, and Vicky immediately teared up, which didn’t surprise me in the least.

“Alpha, please, let us explain. We had no idea you were standing.”

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“How the f\*ck did she know?” | demanded, shaking the desk. “I sure the f\*ck didn’t tell her, which means that one of you did!”

Vicky began to sob, and Talon stood up— a sign that he was actually challenging me to a degree.

“Yes, you did,” Talon said, his voice still calm, even if he was not being submissive.

“What the hell are you talking about?” I asked, standing up to my full height and looking down at him. Talon took a deep breath. “She overheard us talking about it that night, in your room—”

“No.” I began shaking my head as he began to nod his. “That’s not possible. Rosalie was asleep.”

“It is possible,” Talon’s expression was sad. “It is possible, and it happened. She overheard our plans to kill her as soon as the baby was born, Ethan.” His voice softened. “She knew what was going to happen to her.”

“No,” I said again, pursing my lips together to tamp down my emotions. My whole body was shaking. “You’re mistaken, Talon,”

“I’m very sorry that you had to find out this way, Ethan. We wanted to tell you. We were just waiting for the right time.” Talon looked remorseful.

I had no choice but to accept that what he was saying was true.

Rosalie had known that I was going to kill her as soon as the baby was born, so she had killed herself first.

I still didn’t understand. Turning away from him, I ran a hand through my hair.

“But why?” I asked in a whisper. It still didn’t make any sense.

“Alpha, in the letter, she told us that she wanted to choose her own path.” Vicky’s voice was quaking. “You still have yours... don’t you?”

I turned and looked at her over my shoulder. Of course, I still had it. I’d been carrying it around in my pocket since that day.

I hadn’t opened it because reading Rosalie’s words would make it real— and I preferred to live in a world where there was still a chance that she was out there somewhere.

But if I read her letter, and she told me what she was going to do, and why she was going to do it. then I would know for sure.

“Maybe she didn’t think that Madalynn would make a very good mother,” Vicky said, staring at the floor.

“Enough!” | interrupted her, my voice hot with anger.

I knew that she was right, but I didn’t want to hear it— despite the fact that I had asked the question.

“Get out,” I said.

Talon sighed, wrapping his arm around his sister and pulling her out without another word.

I pulled the envelope out of my jacket pocket, staring at Rosalie’s familiar handwriting.

Sitting on the edge of my desk, I traced her writing with my finger... refusing to acknowledge the tears that threatened to fall.

I couldn't breathe.

What had I done to my Rosalie?

All this time, I tried to trick myself into thinking she might come back, that she would never do that to our child... that, maybe, she had just left. She was still out there, and maybe, one day, she would be back.

But now I knew I was lying to myself. She didn't just leave.

She was scared of me—she probably hated me— so much that she'd rather die by her own hand than be touched by me!

So much that she'd rather end her own life than be with a hideous monster!

And I deserved it.

I covered my forehead with my palms... What had I done?!

Images of her beautiful face flickered before my eyes. I saw her smile, heard her laughter, and imagined her touch on my skin.

How could I accept the reality that she was never coming back?

“Alpha!”

Samuel, who had been tasked to search for Rosalie, burst into the room. It seemed that he had been looking for me—I had disconnected myself from the mindlink.

My heart felt so tight that it was as if I was being stabbed over and over. It was so painful that I couldn't bear it.

As if the Moon Goddess had heard my thoughts, the skies opened up, even without a cloud in the sky, and rain began to pour against the windowpane.

If I was standing outside, perhaps it would've cleansed my soul and washed away all of the memories, all of the angst, all of the anger I had pent up inside of me.

But how could I allow myself to let go?

I was the cause of her pain and suffering, and I didn't even see it.

I'd rather be locked away inside of the castle where the rain couldn't reach me, and I'd rather continue to keep my emotions inside of me.

I'd rather continue to be haunted by that beautiful face everywhere I looked, even though she would sneer away from me.

I'd rather carve this pain into my bones than forget about her.

Because I deserved it. For what I did to her, I was the bastard who deserved to be lonely, to be punished with pain, forever.

My hand reached toward the sidebar, where a bottle of whiskey was waiting.

I needed something to help me tonight. Just for this one night. I told myself, because I needed something to help me survive tonight...

## Chapter 70 Her Letter

"Ethan!" Georgia burst into my room.

I took a sip of whisky and looked up. "I thought you were going back to Drogomor."

"What I do is none of your business! Talon told me, how much did you f\*cking drink?"

"Do you need me for anything?"

"I need you to stop all the crap you're doing, okay?" she said bluntly. "There's a war out there, and you..."

"I what? I didn't miss any report, I didn't make any irrational decisions. I've been handling every responsibility just fine. So would you people just leave me alone?!"

She looked at me quietly for a moment.

I thought she would curse, but instead, she said calmly, "Ethan, she's gone. Just let her go peacefully."

My narrowed eyes snapped open. Fury rushed through me. Not at her, but at myself.

"What do you know?! Enough!" | roared.

She would never understand. I was the cause of Rosalie's death. How could I let go of that?!

Georgia sneered. "I know that she's gone and you need to move on! Look at you, what a f\*cking mess you are!"

“Watch how you speak, Georgia.” I growled in my alcohol –addled state of mind and glared at her with fury.

“Or what? Are you going to ship us away again, like you did all those years ago?” she raged. “Or like how you took a vow to the Goddess and abandoned your mate sense when you turned twenty–one?!”

I noticed that her eyes were red.

“Did any of that f\*cking help at all, Ethan? No, it didn’t! If you hadn’t sent us away, Soren would still be here today! If you hadn’t abandoned your mate sense, you might have realized how important Rosalie was...”

Was she about to cry? I couldn’t remember the last time I saw my sister like this...

I couldn’t argue with her at all. I felt like my brain was filled with fog; I couldn’t reason through anything right

now.

The choices I had made... were they all wrong?

My head hurt, and I reached for the amber liquor again.

But Georgia was faster than me. She snatched the glass from my hand and finished her speech:

“So f\*cking put yourself together, Ethan, and let your past go!”

I looked her in the eyes for a moment, then looked away.

“She hated me..,” I murmured– to myself, and maybe to Georgia.

That seemed to take her by surprise.

“What are you talking about?! You know Rosalie. Do you think she would ever say that?”

I shook my head. “But she must have,” I said.

I looked at the envelope on the table. It was still sealed.

Georgia looked at me in disbelief. “You still haven’t read it?!”

Then she straightened herself back up and sneered. “If that’s what you think, then you never actually knew her, you coward!”

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The whole castle was hushed and dark. I had not lit a lamp, but the moon filled *my* room with a soft, ghostly light.

I had succeeded in drinking myself into a stupor, but I'd run out of whisky, and it was starting to wear off. Sleep still evaded me.

The envelope lay on the table, and my eyes never left it.

I stared at Rosalie's familiar handwriting. I could almost smell her faint scent coming off of it.

What did she write?

Probably hateful words telling me what a monster I was?

No, Georgia was probably right, Rosalie was too sweet to do that.

At last, after the hours-long standoff, I reached for the letter. My fingers trembled slightly as I picked it up.

With a deep breath, I ripped the envelope open, and began to read.

*"My Dear Ethan,*

Please allow me to call you so.

When you open this letter, is your brow furrowed as usual? You probably never knew, but I have kissed your brow secretly while you were asleep next to me so many times.

Like all she-wolves, I prayed to the Moon Goddess that she would bless me with a mate who cherished me, protected me, and took all the miseries of life away from me. Even if he wasn't tall or handsome, that wouldn't matter.

Even in my wildest dreams, I never thought I would meet you. Maybe it sounds silly, but you are more than ten thousand times what I expected.

I fell in love at the first sight of you.

I remember that night when I arrived at your pack, the rain pouring down; I remember your scent when you first approached me; I remember the cold hospital light reflecting off your cufflinks.

Anything about you, I remember.

You may think me silly. My love for you was so humble that it dared not make itself known.

I love your cold tones, your sleeping face, and even your angry looks.

I love all that you gave me.

The months I spent with you were the happiest ones of my life.

However, no matter how beautiful the dream was, it was still a dream.

I had to wake up, no matter how unwilling I was.

You are a powerful Alpha— you have an imminent war and you have your people to protect.

Even though my company may have brought you a little comfort in the past, now my presence, I'm afraid, has become more and more of a burden to you.

My heart aches whenever I see your frown.

I love you, and I don't want to see you torn between me and the alliance.

If this decision is difficult for you, then let me be the one to take the needed action.

My body may be gone, but my love will always be with you.

Do not look for us. Our child and I will be with the Moon Goddess, embraced by eternal peace.

And you, my dear Ethan. Please stay strong and be happy.

This is my last and only request of you.

—Rosalie”

As I finished her letter, I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, letting her words settle over me, letting them sink into my soul.

Did she not hate me?

Did she... love me?

How could I bear the thought that I was the one who pushed her to her death?

I traced her writing with my finger, refusing to acknowledge the tears that threatened to fall.

I raised the letter to my lips and held it there, wishing it was her lips I was kissing, before I slid it back into the envelope and put it back inside of my pocket.

“I will do what you asked, Rosalie,” I whispered. “I promise.”

I didn't remember how long I sat there. Finally, with Rosalie's letter securely back in my pocket, I went back to my bedroom and collapsed on my bed. I didn't even bother to change my clothes.

She needed me to be a good Alpha, and I would be.

Even though I had all of the evidence in the world that she was gone, the peace of hearing her answer began to settle over me, and tears stung my eyes as I allowed myself to grieve her. I allowed myself to mourn the loss of such a beautiful woman and the child I would never know, the child we had made together.

Eventually, I fell asleep, and as I slumbered, I saw her face.

She wasn't standing on the cliff this time. Instead, she was in the middle of a beautiful flower garden, wearing a white flowing gown and a crown of daisies around her head. She was holding our baby swaddled in her arms.

"Don't worry, Ethan," she told me. "Everything will be all right now. I love you."

She lifted her hand and touched my face, and for the first time in as long as I could remember, I felt calm.

When I awoke, sometime later, my eyes were crusty from tears. This was foreign to me. Crying was not something I did.

I wiped at them and lay there, staring at the ceiling.

"Rosalie is gone," I murmured, trying to accept it.

Despite all of the evidence, it still didn't seem real.

And then, I felt a tug—a pull unlike anything I had ever experienced before.

It started like a warmth deep down in my abdomen, as if something in the far distance were tugging on me, pulling gently toward it.

It was unsettling in a way that I couldn't describe.

I found myself placing my hand over my abdomen the same way I'd seen Rosalie do many times.

Deciding I'd had enough of the odd experience, I got up from the bed and headed to the shower. It was still early, but I'd finally slept for once, uninterrupted, and I was ready to start my day.

It was the first day of the rest of my life, where I'd have to accept that Rosalie was gone.