

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel

Chapter 241-336

Chapter 21: The Golden Generation

Rowan

I could've kissed the ground at the rocky, wind-swept beach when our boat finally reached the small port of Red Lakes. The journey had been the most difficult thing I had ever done, and I was sure I was going to die at least twice before we finally saw the rolling hills and snow-capped mountains of Red Lake's territory in the distance.

The precious cargo, our solar panels, had made the journey unscathed. We hadn't lost a single crewman, and our boat was in one piece. The forty-foot swells had tossed us mercilessly, but we had survived. The journey across the Ghilhandia Sea was doable. We had been successful.

And my success was met with a prize. My mate.

I felt her the second I set foot on the beach. I could smell her, her scent warm and comforting like honey and freshly baked bread. She smelled like home somehow, but a home I'd never known. A home, I realized shortly after Eugene introduced me to his daughters, that I would likely never know.

Because the beautiful Hanna, with her dark, lustrous hair and warm brown eyes, was betrothed to another man.

And I was meant to marry her older sister, Kacidra.

Red Lakes was everything I expected it to be. It was densely wooded and mountainous, the water of the vast, seemingly endless lake the village bordered was just that, red, its rocky beach dappled with strangled colored burnt orange and green rocks.

The trees here were the real prize, thick evergreens and redwoods with trunks so thick your hands wouldn't touch if you wrapped your arms around them. These trees were older than the earth itself it seemed, ancient giants towering over man's creation with their thick branches outstretched and full to create a never-ending canopy over the small, sleepy village the Alpha of Red Lakes and his family called home.

Eugene was a small man, standing nearly a foot shorter than myself but with a loud, outgoing personality to make up for it. He was vibrant and domineering, demanding and receiving respect from the three hundred or so pack members who accepted him as their leader. Eugene had forged a path for these people. He had accomplished what was seemingly impossible when he broke away from the packs of Finadli and traveled north with his flock, knowing full well the separation would be a dangerous endeavor. But they had survived, and thrived, in a place once thought inhospitable.

My parents respected him for it. I could see why my father trusted the man and why he considered him a friend.

And I was to marry his daughter.

There was no point in protesting. Kacidra had done that enough to cover the length of my stay during the first few hours on land. Kacidra was the eldest by two minutes, Aaron's twin sister in fact, fair of skin and hair like her father but with an attitude to make even the most stoic man surrender.

Oh, Kacidra would have been a true match for Maeve, no doubt. They would've hated each other, at least until they realized how powerful they could be as allies. Kacidra and Maeve could rule the world together if given the chance.

And so, I spent two weeks in the torment of Kacidra and agony over her sister, who hadn't said a single word to me and wouldn't meet my eye, no matter how much I tried to accidentally find myself in her path. No, Hanna wouldn't even look at me. She was

going to reject me. It was likely she had no choice.

I could already feel the pain of it.

I kept busy, however, setting up the rows upon rows of solar panels in a large open space on the outskirts of the village where the trees were sparse and the ground was dry and flat from constant, unrelenting sun. Sulfur springs bubbled incessantly in the background as I worked, my head always bent to my task.

But the third week, things changed. Kacidra had given up on making my life as miserable as possible, growing bored of pestering me. We found ourselves, surprisingly, enjoying each other's company as we set up the

panels and tested the lines, Kacidra pouring over the blueprints for the underground lines that would eventually bring power into the village.

Suddenly, I had a friend in Red Lakes, the relationship budding between us taking the edge of my pain of losing my mate, at least

temporarily

“Are you sure you’re doing it right? I think that’s upside down.” Kacidra was leaning against one of the solar panels, her blond hair tied back in a long braid over one shoulder as she watched me struggling with a shorted-out battery pack. I wiped the sweat from my brow, running my fingers through my hair that had grown too long for my liking since arriving in Red Lakes.

“I know what I’m doing!” I said under my breath, hitting the pack several times with the palm of my hand. To my surprise, the little green light that indicated it was absorbing power from the solar panel came back on and began to blink. “See, I told you I knew what I was doing.

She rolled her eyes. “Dumb luck, Rowan. What am I supposed to do when one of these breaks again and you’re not here?”

“Well, it won’t be your problem, seeing as you’re coming back to Winter Forest with me.”

“I will absolutely not be doing that.”

“Sure,” I breathed, fumbling with the breaker box on the back of the panel as I tried to slide the battery pack back in place.

“What’s the matter?” I asked, moving on to the next solar panel.

“Oh, nothing really. Just thinking of some gossip I heard in the village this summer.” She twirled the end of her braid between her fingers, giving me a teasing smile.

I waited a moment for her to continue as I pried open the next utility box, peering over the top of the panel when she remained silent. “Are you going to tell me what it is?”

“Mmm.. if you really want to know.”

“Well, it’s either listen to you talk or enjoy the peaceful solitude of nature.”

She scowled, tossing her braid behind her back and rolling a rock back and forth along the pad of her foot as she pondered whether I was worthy of whatever she had to say. This was the game we had been playing since I arrived.

“Wrenn Abdordeen got someone pregnant,” she said, matter-of-factly, tilting her head for a better view of the flush that ripped across my cheeks.

“Who?”

Hanna was betrothed to Wrenn, who was nothing more than a neanderthal in tight jeans and a crisp white T-shirt. The man could barely put a sentence together. I was more shocked by the fact he knew where he was supposed to put it over the scandal of a baby born outside of a marriage. Nevertheless, the news sent a ripple of excitement through my core as I straightened up to my full height, the question I desperately needed the answer to written clear as day on my face.

“Doesn’t matter, really. Someone from a neighboring pack to the south.”

“Does that mean...”

She pursed her lips, shrugging casually as she nodded her head. “Well, Dad might not go through with the wedding now,”

“Yes!” I exclaimed, pumping my fist in the air before I could stop myself. Kacidra only rolled her eyes, crossing her arms over her chest as she watched me dissolve into a puddle of hope and anticipation.

Kacidra had known for a while that Hanna and I were mates. She had sensed it, somehow. Seeing me struggle with the pain of Hanna’s rejection had been the turning point in my relationship with Kacidra. We now had the same enemy. Wrenn.

“Don’t get too excited yet, cowboy.” She picked at a hole in her jacket, watching me through narrowed eyes. “You and I are still supposed to get married, remember?”

“Yeah, so,”

this drama spin for a while before we can even think of broaching the subject of dissolving our own engagement.”

“Would your dad seriously have Hanna marry that guy? After-after this?” I waved my hands wildly, fear creeping in again. I had

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been on edge over Hanna since my arrival, and Kacidra was obviously enjoying toying with my emotions right now.

“Uh, yeah. It’s possible.”

“But why?”

“Why? Come on, Rowan! Think with that big, manly brain of yours.”

I fought back the scoff that was tickling the back of my throat as she took a few steps forward, stopping to lean on another solar panel

She continued, “What are we to our parents besides pawns in a great game of conquer and divide? Your family was one of the lucky ones, you know, able to hang on to their lands and birthrights after the war and all. My father will go down in history as the Alpha who brought the packs to the northwest to settle land once deemed uninhabitable. They even named that road after him. We’re the golden generation. We give them the ability to further their conquests.”

Kacidra was referring to the narrow dirt road that led from Red Lakes all the way down to the border of Finaldi. Eugene had cut through the dense forest himself, with the help of his pack of course, chopping down trees to clear their path to where they would eventually put down a claim on the land. Other smaller packs from Finaldi had followed, settling here and there along the four hundred mile stretch of road that took ten years to complete. Kacidra had been a teenager by the time they began to build the new village.

“This is a young pack,” she continued, “and my dad would do anything to keep it alive, including selling his own daughters.” “You weren’t sold to me,”

“Oh? What else would you call it? An exchange? I was the payment for these solar panels.”

“Stop-”

“I’m the bridge for the alliance between our packs, right? The two of us are just pawns, Rowan. Just like Hanna and Wrenn. Wrenn is hands down the

stupidest person I have ever met. He's just a pretty face. But he is the son of Alpha Hector of the Red Moon pack. Dad needs an alliance with them to complete the road south past the border of Finaldi."

"This is..." I began, unable to find the words.

"Medieval?" she suggested, tapping her fingers on the top of the solar panel. "Look, all I'm saying is don't get your hopes up. okay? Alliances, alliances, alliances. Look at Aaron and Maeve's situation,"

"Yeah, yeah," I said, waving my hand in dismissal, not wanting to talk about it. "But, I mean, the alliance between our families would still be in place if I married Hanna instead."

"What about Red Moon, then? Hmm? Who are they going to marry off to Wrenn—" She paused, glaring at me. "NOT me."

I shrugged, playfully kicking a small rock across the dirt in her direction. She stopped it with her shoe, rolling it with her toes. "Why not? He's not your type?" I teased.

She scowled, shaking her head as she kicked the rock forcefully in my direction. The small stone bounced off the ground and bit me in the shin.

"He's not my type."

"What is your type, then? Tall, lean men with—"

"No one here, that's for sure."

"That's not a very nice thing to say in front of your future husband," I said dryly.

She snorted, looking away from me as she continued, "Anyway, do you understand what I'm trying to say?"

"Yeah, I get it. You're definitely not wrong," I said as I crouched back down behind the solar panel, screwing the door of the utility box back into place.

"Hanna is wholly loyal to our pack, Rowan," she said with slight annoyance. She won't do anything to stop her engagement from going through, not unless she's ordered to. You have to understand that."

“Yeah, sure.” i felt a little hot, my throat dry as I swallowed. Surely, the mate bond was stronger than the loyalty she felt, stronger than her sense of duty and purpose.

I needed to talk to my parents about this, but my dad wouldn't be there for a while yet, and it was too important to write in a letter.

I stood, walking past Kacidra and beckoning her to follow as I made my way through the rows of panels toward the little cabin like structure that had been built to house the huge batteries that were fed by the solar panels. I opened another set of utility boxes, searching through the switches and flipping them on. A low, electric thrum filled the space around us as the panels began to turn on, lifting their faces toward the sun,

“Perfect,” I muttered as I closed the boxes, looking out over the glistening field of silicon. “There won't be power to the village for two or three days still, if everything goes well. Once the main batteries are charged, and the back-up batteries are at fifty percent capacity, we can open the lines and feed power through to the village.”

She looked over my shoulder, standing on her tiptoes to do so. “Cool.”

*Is that all you have to say? Look at all the work we did today,”

“Rowan?” came a soft, honeyed voice from behind us. I turned around, taking Kacidra by the shoulders to move her out of the way

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Chapter 22: Mothers Like Ours

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Rowan

She was wet. Water dripped from her hair onto the dry, cracked earth at her feet. Her nightgown was clinging to her skin, showing off her shapely curves in their entirety. I fought the urge to reach out and touch her, to cover her, but Kacidra grabbed my arm and yanked me backward.

“Rowan, don't,” kacidra said firmly, her face pale and flushed with concern.

Hanna was looking at me, her deep brown eyes wide and flaked with gold. A wave of unease washed over me as I looked at her, the feeling cutting through the intensity of the bond we had yet to act on.

“Hanna?” Kacidra said in a tone I had never heard from her before. She looked almost motherly as she gazed at her sister, her eyes cloudy with despair. Hanna didn’t answer. She kept her eyes on me, reaching out her hand with her palm up toward the sky. “Don’t touch her Rowan,” Kacindra warned, sucking in her breath as she stepped between us, taking Hanna lightly by the shoulders and turning her around, the two of them walking slowly out of the field of solar panels and into the woods. “Come find me later, Rowan. We need to talk!” Kacidra’s voice echoed as she disappeared from view. –

Maeve

Gemma moved out from behind the desk in her office, flipping through the pages of a thick, paperback book.

“Are you.. nauseous?”

“Nope.”

“Are you... having back pain?”

“No.”

“What about food aversions?”

“Not at all.”

“Hmm...” She leaned against desk, her eyes scanning the book’s contents. It had been a week since Aaron and I slept together in the library. I was still reeling from it, processing it. Thankfully things were good between Aaron and me. He was attentive and playful like usual. There wasn’t a sheet of awkwardness between us.

And, I hadn’t given Gemma the details about our night. For some reason, I was desperate to keep it to myself, to cherish it. My heart squeezed as I sat down and looked up at the massive book she was holding. It was about

pregnancy, I realized as my eyes flitted over the cover and title that was broken up by Gemma's splayed fingers.

If I was pregnant, Aaron would be leaving soon. I didn't want to even think about it. "Does your mouth taste like metal?"

"What?"

Gemma shrugged, closing the book and setting it on her desk. "It's obviously too early to know, right?"

"It's only been a week since.... Well, I think I have to go in for another blood sample next week."

"Ah, yeah. It's too early. And they'll probably need to send the sample to the labs at the University. I guess we just... wait and see." She turned toward the window, the sun reflecting off the dainty necklace she was wearing around her neck. I tilted my head to the side to get a better look at it.

"Where did that come from?"

She reached up to touch the delicate chain, sliding her touch down to finger the oval-shaped moonstone that was fixed in an intricate gold setting. "It was my mother's," she said with a soft, airy smile.

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"I've never seen you wear it before. It's beautiful!" I loved dainty jewelry, but I couldn't be trusted to wear it. I always snapped the chains of bracelets and necklaces and lost them, and my hands were too busy for rings. Gemma's necklace highlighted her slender neck, the color of the moonstone vibrant against the creamy color of her skin.

"I never thought to wear it, honestly. It was part of her collection. It kinda... I don't know, called to me this morning, if that makes sense."

I shrugged, missing my own mother suddenly. I did like to see Gemma dressing up more, though. She had traded her simple button-down shirts and jeans for skirts and dresses, rouge on her cheeks and lips and her hair now tied back in a neat bun at the nape of her neck. I looked down at my shorts,

the same ones I had stolen back from Aaron a few days ago, and smiled softly to myself.

Gemma was every bit a Luna. I only wished she could see it. I wished Ernest would get over the insane notion that he was cursed so that they could be together.

“What are you up to today?” Gemma asked as she rounded her desk and sat back down, reaching into a drawer to pull out her agenda.

I shrugged again, standing and adjusting the tight shorts. Had these actually fit Aaron better than me?

Aaron and I are going to the village for lunch. I’ll be back before dinner.”

Gemma gave me a parting smile as I left her office, closing the door behind me. Aaron had come into my room in the early morning, waking me at the crack of dawn by throwing the curtains open and being as loud as possible. I never woke early, but Aaron was obviously a creature of the morning, always chipper and at his most annoying.

“I need to talk to you about something,” he had said into my ear, leaning over me to kiss me on the cheek before I could swat him away. “Meet me at Johnny’s for lunch at noon, okay?”

Rowan

“She was asleep.” Kacidra poked at the fire that separated us with a stick, holding it up and examining the flame before bringing it back down onto the ground, drawing a long black line in the dirt.

“Like, sleepwalking?”

She nodded gravely, tossing the stick in the fire and walking toward me. She sat on one of the logs, stretching her legs out in front of her. “My mother used to do the same thing sometimes. More so before she died. She didn’t call it sleepwalking, though. She always said it was more complicated than that. She called it dream dancing. She said, and it sounds crazy, that she was walking the thin line between our world and hers.”

“Hers?”

“The Moon Goddess. She controls our dreams, according to our mother. Mom made... she made decisions about our lives based on what she saw.”

“How long has she been doing this?”

“Hanna? Since she could walk. Our mother was always so proud of it, too. They were truly bonded. Hanna only really ever spoke to her. The rest of us were just. I don’t know. We didn’t understand them. Even Dad didn’t understand; he was scared of it. He was scared they would hurt themselves, but my mother encouraged it.”

“How did Hanna get out to the solar field? It’s nearly a mile-long walk-”

“She’s gone farther before.” Kacidra swallowed hard, looking out over the riverbed toward the dim, yellow lights in the trees beyond, the lantern light from the windows in the village.

“Does she remember her dreams?” I asked, curious but also totally confused. Hanna had looked like she was awake. She had moved like she was awake. She was standing, blinking, and breathing with effort from the walk and the heat.

“Hanna? I don’t know. If so, she’s never told me about them. My mother.. my mother did. She told me.” Kacidra was uneasy, almost fearful.

“Can you tell me what she saw?”

She shook her head. “I can’t describe it like she could, and it was so long ago now. I just remember a word she often repeated

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when she was dreaming, Leto. I don’t know what it means.”

“Leto was the Moon Goddess’s name,” I said quickly, without meaning to say it aloud. Kacidra looked up at me expectantly, waiting for an explanation as to where I had gotten that information. “It’s not taught in not in church and stuff.

But my mom is a White Queen, She supposedly shares the blood of the Moon Goddess.”

“Yeah, those.”

“I never understood why my mother said it, though. Why would she?”

“Maybe she was on a first-name basis with the Goddess in her dreams, or something,” I said, trying to sound playful, but my words fell flat and serious.

A silence passed between us, broken only by the sound of the fire and the river’s roaring current behind us.

“What do you think Hanna dreams about?” I finally asked.

Kacidra took a deep breath, giving me a defeated look. “I don’t know. I really don’t. But today was the first time in my life I’ve heard her say anything during one of her spells.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, and it was your name. Rowan. She said Rowan.”

“Well, she’s obviously dreaming of me, then.” Again I tried to tease, but my chest tightened around the words. Kacidra was usually the one joking around. Tonight, she was stone-cold serious.

“My mother died while she was dreaming. I know Dad told you she... she got sick, but really she just dropped onto her knees one morning and never stood back up. She was stuck in her dream. I know she was. It was shortly after we returned from visiting your family, ten years ago or so. Tell me, did you feel the mate bond earlier? When she came to the solar farm?”

“I guess. I mean, yeah.”

“But did you feel it, feel it?” She was looking at me earnestly, her eyes begging me to understand, which I did. I hadn’t felt the magnetic pull. I had only caught the faintest whiff of her scent.

*No. I didn’t feel it as strongly.”

“I think that’s because she wasn’t, like, in her body,”

“Hold on now,” I said, raising my hands up to stop her. “This is getting a little... I just don’t understand what we saw, okay? Why was she soaking wet, first of all.”

“That’s her thing when she’s dreaming. She swims.”

“Swims? Swims where?”

The river, probably. We haven’t ever caught her doing it, but she always returns to us after a spell wet like that

“Is she is she okay? kacidra?” Fear gripped me, twisting painfully in my stomach as I thought of Hanna and the far-away look in her eyes. This was my mate, after all. I suddenly realized her total avoidance of me during my stay might have more to do with the fact that she was in a dream state rather than rejection.

“I don’t know. I really don’t know. I want to believe it, but our mother was so unwell toward the end, and she ‘dream danced infrequently. Hanna has them every day. Every single day.”

I looked into the fire, my mind doing a dance of its own. I thought coming to Red Lakes would bring me peace and direction, a stepping stone toward my greater ambitions.

But finding my mate had thrown me for a loop. And now?

“Wouldn’t it be great to just be normal every once in a while?” I asked, glancing over at Kacidra. I had been slowly accepting her as a friend before, and definitely liked her company, but now I had a newfound respect for the woman.

“Yeah.. it would. But with mothers like ours, it’s damn near impossible, isn’t it?”

I nodded, smiling softly to myself. I don’t think my mom had visions. She hadn’t said she did, anyway. I’m sure she would have told

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1. I'm sure Dad would've known.

"Was your mom from Finaldi, like you all?" I asked, sitting down on the log beside her. It was dark, truly the dead of night now. But just like in Winter Forest, the sun still hung low in the sky, casting a heavy purple light across the sky.

She shook her head, "She wasn't. She was from the isles, though not originally." She made a face like she didn't want to say more or didn't know the history, so I let it go.

"Really? I leaned in, intrigued that she wasn't originally from Finaldi.

"Yeah, she came to Finaldi as a teenager; that's where she met Dad. He was a warrior for the Alpha of Breles. She was just a villager. Their Alpha was old-school and deeply involved in the personal lives of his pack; he didn't give them permission to marry, so they left and hid near the Northern Border until after the war. That is when they began their journey here."

Another moment of silence gripped us, and we sat close to each other in the stillness. I reached out and took her hand in mine, squeezing it. "I want to help her. I know you do, too. What can we do?"

Kacidra looked up at me, her eyes welling with tears for a moment before she composed herself.

"Her dream journal, Rowan. We need to find it."

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Chapter 23: Train Ride to Nowhere

Troy

I was in deep.

Totally and completely in over my head.

And as I watched Horace approach, his gnarled figure limping through the garden as though he were simply out on a stroll, I tensed, my shoulders tight

and rigid as I straightened up to my full height and leaned the rake I was holding against one of the freshly pruned bushes.

The garden had become our meeting place after Maeve had caught me on the outskirts of the castle grounds on my first day in residence. Horace and I had been leaving notes to each other beneath a pile of fallen stones in the dilapidated shed since I arrived in Valoria several weeks ago as prepared to masquerade as Aaron, the breeder. Aaron, the one I knew she was falling in love with.

She didn't know me. She couldn't know me. And when she cried out his name while I moved within her, I could have screamed and beat my fists in agony. Oh, I was in trouble. Meeting my mate was not part of the plan.

Neither was trying to save her life.

I was here to trick her, to stall until Damian's warriors arrived to take over the castle. That was the original plan, at least. No one had said a thing about killing her. Romero wanted me to actually bed her and get her pregnant, potentially holding her hostage until the child was born and Romero could do away with her, or worse, keep her alive to harness her powers.

But I wasn't Romero's pawn. I hadn't even known he existed until the Persephone made port in Avondale, the capital of the Isles, six months ago when Alpha Damian demanded my presence and vaguely explained the mission.

I never considered myself part of Poldesse. We smuggled and pirated for them, sure, but I had grown up running wild with the other orphaned "beach rats" until Keaton had stolen enough coins and gems to have the rotten body of the Persephone towed from its shallow grave on a beach on the island of Suntra and fully renovate her.

Then we sailed the high seas. That was my home. My pack. That was where my loyalties lie.

But then I found out I had a living grandfather, and everything changed.

I would have done anything to know him, to look upon his face and maybe, just maybe, see a hint of the mother I couldn't remember.

But Romero was a monster. A sick, deranged old man. And as I stood in the garden waiting for Horace to make his way toward me, I realized how much of a monster I was being to Maeve myself.

I had to get out of it. I had to get her out of it.

“So, it’s done? You’ve-”

“Slept with her?” I hissed, keeping my voice low lest the gardeners were listening. I always spent my mornings in the garden, not having much else to do. The physical labor was good for me.

“Yes. Were you successful?”

“Well, we’ll have to wait and see, won’t we?” I sneered, grasping the rake once more and running it over the freshly cut grass. Horace’s lips stretched into a thin smile as he watched me, my obvious disdain for him seemingly adding years to his life. He was always lurking around, keeping an eye on me. I hated him immensely. I didn’t trust him. And if he ever laid a finger on Maeve.

Speaking of Maeve, I had somewhere to be.

I tossed the rake across the lawn toward the pile of gardening equipment and pushed past Horace, who looked after me in surprise.

“Where are you going?”

I looked back at him, narrowing my eyes into slits. “Did Ernest not tell you? He’s sending me on an errand. I’ll be back tomorrow night.” It was a lie.

“Romero wants to see you. You need to be at the castle,” Horace said quickly, his voice low and beady eyes scanning the garden as he took a step toward me, his arm outstretched as though the skeleton of a man was going to attempt to grab me and physically prevent me from moving.

“He can wait. He’s not going anywhere, obviously,” I snorted, looking up at Romero’s tower for a moment before flashing Horace a beaming, although fake, smile. “See ya!”

“Get back here, you insolent boy-”

I was already leagues ahead of him, walking briskly through the garden and out onto the pathway leading down into the village through the greenbelt. I beelined for the trees, cursing under my breath that I hadn't had time to change out of the dirt-smearred jeans and T-shirt I was wearing. I picked grass clippings from my hair as I walked, tripping over a few roots on my way down. Maeve was supposed to meet me at the bar. I wanted to get there first.

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"What do you mean you're leaving?" Maeve took the glass of sparkling water from her lips, her blonde brows knitted in a frown.

"It's not forever. I'll be back tomorrow night."

"What is this errand Ernest has you going on?" She sipped her drink, her full, pink lips lingering on the glass a moment.

I felt warm all over, and not from the heat of the day. We hadn't been together intimately since that night in the library a week ago. I had been trying to avoid her as much as I could. I always tried to avoid her. But she kept pulling me back in. I could've reached across the table and taken her by the back of the neck, bending her over

"I have to fetch something from the port for him," I said, gripping my pint of beer for dear life as the image faded from my mind.

She sipped from her glass again, then made a face, putting it back down on the café table.

"What's the matter?"

"Why would Ernest be sending you to the port and not one of his warriors?"
"Because I have nothing to do."

She arched her brow, looking out over the street where the market stalls were flooding with people. "What are you fetching?"

"I don't know. I didn't ask."

She gave me another look, her face somewhat clouded with emotion this time.

“Are you upset?” I asked.

“What happens now, Aaron?”

I bit the inside of my cheek the way I always did when she mentioned Aaron’s name. I knew this conversation was coming. I had fulfilled my duties as a breeder this past week. Now we waited.

If she was pregnant well, the real Aaron would’ve been packed up on a ship headed for Finaldi in a week’s time. What’s the plan? I thought helplessly, looking over at her and trying to steel my expression. Damian’s men would be here in two weeks to take over. Romero would be free. Maeve would be at his mercy.

But not if I could get word to the Persephone first.

“I don’t know,” I said honestly, looking into her eyes. “But I promise you’re going to be okay.”

She gave me a quizzical glance and opened her mouth to speak as I quickly drained the last of my beer, wiping my mouth on the back of my hand. I stood and rounded the table, squeezing her shoulder as I bent down, whispering, “We can talk about this later. I have to go if I’m going to make the next train.”

I desperately wanted to kiss her, especially as she opened her mouth to protest. My fingers ached as my touch left her skin, and I walked off the curb. I tucked them in the pockets of my jeans as I walked, willing myself not to look back.

The post office had given me a schedule for the Port of Valoria when I requested one two weeks ago. I was looking for the Persephone, knowing she would dock at the port at least once during my stay. I knew Keaton wouldn’t be a part of Damian’s invasion, he had made that very clear. But, I needed to catch her first and get word to Keaton somehow, let him know I needed him to linger in the waters off the coast of Valoria and expect me to board when Damian and his pack flooded port on their way to Mirage.

And I would be bringing Maeve with me.

I bought a train ticket and waited on the platform, glancing over my shoulder every once and a while to be sure Maeve hadn’t followed me.

The Persephone was supposed to dock today, and I had at least a six-hour journey to the port by train. I could have shifted, of course, but I didn't know my way around the center of Mirage. The railway to the port was new, constructed in the last ten years or so based on what Maeve had told me, and it would take me directly to the port, and from the port I could do my best to locate Keaton and his crew.

But when I finally reached my location, well after the sun had set over the southern horizon, I was met with a nearly empty port, the little seaside village quiet and somber in the light evening rain.

I walked into one of the taverns near the docks, running my fingers through my hair to bring the wet strands away from my face.

I sat down, looking around as I did so, hoping to see a familiar face. "What can I get you, mister?" A plump waitress with a pretty, young face was standing before me, her round hazel eyes alight with flirtation.

smiled at her, nodding to the bar. "Whatever's on tap. I'm not picky."

She smiled, bobbing her head and walking away, joining up with a group of women who were obviously working in the tavern, the trio looking at me over their shoulders as the waitress poured my beer.

I looked around again, spotting a man sitting in a corner booth with his head hanging over a large ledger, pencil in hand. He looked up at the window periodically, frowning, his wire-rimmed spectacles following down the bridge of nose as he checked his books again. I stood, ignoring the fact that the waitress was on her way over with the beer, and walked toward the man, sliding into the booth and sitting opposite him.

He looked up, surprised.

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Chapter 23: Train Ride to Nowhere

"I'm looking for the Persephone," I began, watching suspicion twist his brow. "She was supposed to be docked here today."

“Aye, yeah. She was meant to dock. The weather’s holding off several of the larger ships that are coming from open water.”

“So, she hasn’t been here yet?”

The man shook his head, arching his brow in my direction. “You have business with the captain of that ship?”

“He’s a friend,” I said honestly.

The man looked back down at his ledger, my suspicions about the contents being correct. He was a port master, and the estimated arrival and departure times were clear as day in ink in his books.

“Well, don’t wait up for him. This storm is holdin’ strong; I doubt anyone is going to attempt to cross the channel tonight. Could be tomorrow afternoon before they drop their anchor.”

“Is there a way to get word to him in my absence? A letter, perhaps?” I reached into my back pocket and pulled out my wallet, flashing a handful of bills. The man’s eyes narrowed for a moment before he leaned back in his seat, crossing his arms over his chest. “That ship is well known on the seas, you know. Captain Keaton, is it? He’s a smuggler.” .

“Yeah, and there’s a cut from his recent shipment for you if you can get a letter to him when he makes landfall.”

The man sighed deeply, looking outside for a moment before looking back at me, his expression relaxing as he held out his hand, palm out and open. I placed the bills in his hand and he tore a piece of paper from his ledger, handing it to me along with a pencil.

“Be sure this gets into his hands directly,” I said as I reluctantly passed him another bill, waiting for his nod of understanding.

Keaton, there’s more to this than I realized. Wait for me. Don’t leave the waters of Valoria. I will come to you in a week.

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 244

Chapter 24: What’s in a Name?

Gemma

I slipped from Ernest's bed, quiet as a mouse. He rolled onto his side and wrapped his arms around his pillow, barely waking as he moved and quickly fell back to sleep, his eyelashes fluttering against his cheeks.

I reached down and gathered my clothes, clutching them to my naked chest as I searched in vain for my underwear in the darkened room.

The only light was an eerie green glow coming from the windows where rain hammered against the side of the castle. Thunder boomed in the low-lying clouds, the sound strangely comforting as I pulled my shirt over my head and shimmied into my skirt. The storm raging outside the castle walls had covered the sounds of pure ecstasy coming from the Alpha's quarters, and I felt deliciously exposed as I snuck from the room, carrying my shoes in one hand, my underwear still very much missing,

Oh, I was behaving like an idiot. I was setting myself up for heartbreak. I couldn't help it. I really couldn't. Ernest's hands on my body and his words whispered against my neck had awakened something deep within me. I couldn't put out the flame now, no matter how hard I tried.

And I had tried.

But I smiled softly to myself as I walked down the corridor, a blush touching my cheeks as I ascended the stairs, and I realized I was walking with a slight limp.

Oh, what would Maeve say when I told her "Ouch!" I dropped my shoes, bringing my hands to my face as I cradled my nose. I could smell the blood before it began to flow, the wetness rolling from my nostrils over my lips and between my fingers. "Shit, Gemma!" Aaron grabbed me by the shoulder, using his free hand to tilt my head back by my chin. He was soaking wet, the water dripping from his clothes onto the floor. "I'm so sorry. I didn't see you. I couldn't-"

"Where are you coming from at this hour?" I said, my voice a nearly inaudible gurgling sound as the blood rolled into my open mouth.

"I went for a.. for a run."

He was lying

I took my hands from my face, inhaling deeply and then sneezing with force, which caused him to jump backward out of my line of fire. "Is it broken?" he asked, gingerly stepping forward again. "No," I said, sighing with relief. Luckily I'd found some tissues on a side table to stem the bleeding. "But it hurts. What did I run into?"

"My shoulder. I didn't see you walking by at all." His voice was trembling slightly. I narrowed my eyes to peer at him through the dark but could barely even see the outline of his figure.

"Where are you going? Your room is on the fourth floor?"

*** I forgot something."

"Forgot what?"

"It's nothing."

He was lying again. I just knew it. I pressed him further.

"It's obviously something if you're wandering the castle sopping wet."

"I just told you. I was out for a run."

"Don't lie to me, Aaron!" I stepped forward, thinking I was closing the distance between us but ended up to the side of him.

"I'm right here, Gem!"

"You don't get to call me that," I hissed, turning toward his voice. And I have it on good authority you were seen boarding a train today, the two o'clock train to the Port of Valoria. What were you doing there?"

"Ernest sent me

"No, he didn't. I was with him-"I bit my lip. I hadn't meant to say that out loud. But before I could retract my statement or attempt to deflect, Aaron had me by the shoulders again, steering me across the corridor and into a storage closet

“What the hell – I nearly screamed before his hand flew over my mouth and he pressed me against the wall of the closet, his free hand reaching up to turn on the tiny, flickering lightbulb over our heads.

Chapter 24: What’s in a Name?

“Don’t scream,” he said calmly, his hand still planted firmly against my mouth. He took his hand away, and I inhaled deeply, a shriek erupting from my mouth before he clamped his hand over it again. “No one can hear you over this storm, Gemma. I’m not going to hurt you. I need your help.”

“My help?” I said into the palm of his hand. I gripped his forearm, pinching his skin with my nails until I drew blood and he finally let go.

But he was blocking the door.

“I’ll scream again,” I warned, stepping toward him.

He wiped his bloodied hands on his wet jeans and looked up at me, shaking his head. “You won’t.”

“Oh? Let me out or take your chances-” “This is about Maeve. She’s in danger. I need to get her out of Valoria, tonight.” He stood there, only feet from me, his face drawn with deep lines of fatigue.

“What?”

“I’ve been at the port, you’re right about that. I was trying to get word to my boat.”

“You’re boat? What are you talking about, Aaron?”

He took a step forward, fixing me with a serious stare. “Romero. Did you know he’s in the tower, right above our heads?”

“Romero –The Romero? Of,”

“Of Poldesse, yes.” “Don’t lie to me!”

“I’m not lying!” he pleaded, looking as though he was about to drop to his knees. He looked absolutely exhausted.

“Did you run here? From the port? You shifted and ran all that way, didn’t you?”

He nodded, his chest rising and falling as he took a deep breath. “It was faster than waiting on the train. I needed to get back here.”

“Why were you there? Tell me the truth!” I bellowed, which caused him to wince and tilt his head toward the door.

“Keep your voice down, okay?” He stepped closer to me, his hands outstretched in surrender, “Like I said before, I needed to get word to my ship-”

“What are you talking about—”

“I’m trying to explain—”

“What ship. Aaron?”

“My name isn’t Aaron!” His hands were clenched into fists and trembling at his sides, his eyes downcast toward the floor.

I opened my mouth to speak but nothing came from between my lips, only the sound of my labored breathing as I tried to catch my breath.

Once I had, I asked, “Who are you?”

“You knew the whole time, didn’t you? That I wasn’t Aaron of Red Lakes?” He leaned against the door, his eyes bloodshot and lined with dark circles. I nodded, my breath catching in my throat. I swallowed as the hair stood straight up on my arms.

“Where is he? Aaron? Did you-”

“No. Aaron is fine. He’s alive, and well. I promise you that.” “How can I believe a single word you say?” “You have to. You have to trust me right now. You can hate me later. Maeve is in-” “Danger? What the actual f*ck, Aar. What the hell is your real name? Who are you!”

“My name is Troy.”

“Your last name?”

“Black Troy Black..”

“What pack are you from?”

“I don’t have a pack.”

“So, you’re a rogue”

“No! Jeez, Gemma! We don’t have time for this.” He grabbed my shoulders, shaking me. “Please, Gemma. Listen to me. Maeve has to get out of here. You need to get out of here. You have to go back to Winter Forest.”

He was desperate

“I don’t understand-get off of me!”

Chapter 24: What’s in a Name?

He let go of my shoulders and let his arms drop to his sides, defeat lining his face. “I love her. I can’t let them. I can’t.” He backed away, looking at me pleadingly.

*Please, just let me go. Just leave, whoever you are. Just leave the castle tonight. Please!” i begged.

“I can’t do that. Not yet.”.

“Why?”

“I need you on my side,”

“Your side of what? What happened to Aaron? Why the hell are you here?!”

He told me everything, the words falling from his lips in rapid succession as he leaned his back against the door, closing his eyes. Aaron had been left on an island in the Isles of Denali while Troy had come to Valoria in his place. He told me how he had no intentions of even touching Maeve, that his mission had been strictly to break Romero out of the tower.

He told me about Horace, the explanation sending ripples of gooseflesh up my arms as the pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place. Horace was a spy. and Troy was sure there were others in the castle working toward that same end, the end that took my breath away.

Troy had been deceived by everyone, he explained. His true mission was much, much more than he had anticipated. Poldesse was coming. They were coming for Drogomor. Alpha Damian and his warriors were coming to take over and leave destruction in their path.

He told me he was Romero's grandson. He told me about Romero's sick mind, and his sick plan.

—

"I love her," he repeated. Over and over. "I wanted her. I couldn't stop myself. I took advantage of the situation. I have to get her out."

"It's too early to know if she's pregnant," I stated, my voice shaky and uncertain. He looked up at me, tears welling in the corner of his eyes. He only . nodded, grimacing as he struggled to take a breath. He had quieted after telling me his story, but something else was weighing on him. Something severe.

I stepped forward, reaching out to him, my hands trembling as I touched his shoulder.

"Damian wants something. Something that only Romero can give him," he said quietly, sleepily.

"What is it?"

"I don't know. I tried to ask. Romero is sick in his head, I'm sure of it. His words are nonsensical ramblings. I.. I think he's deceiving Damian. I think this is a trap. I think all of us, including Damian, are falling into a trap."

"I don't understand."

"I don't know what else to say. This is all I know."

"And what of Maeve? Will she be safe in Winter Forest?"

He shook his head from side to side, his eyes downcast. "I don't know. I need to wake Ernest."

"No, please don't," I begged, my heart twisting into a knot. I didn't trust Troy. I had no idea whether what he was saying was true, I didn't know if he actually

meant to go down to Ernest's room and strangle him to death. "Let me do it. I will tell him. I promise I will tell him."

"You have to do it right now."

"Wh-why? You said they were coming but... the Isles are so far-"

"I was looking for my ship when I noticed the name of Damian's cruiser on the port master's ledger. It was supposed to reach the port today. If not for the storm, we would have been overrun by Damian's army. He has a fleet. He was using the port reservation as a decoy."

"An army? He's sneaking an army into Valoria? Are you serious?"

Troy stepped forward, his eyes deadly and utterly serious.

"The weather won't stop them, Gemma. We have until morning."

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 245

Chapter 25: Back to Finish the Job

Ernest

"Ernest? Ernest, hey.** Wake up. I'm so sorry,"

I opened my eyes, Gemma's voice filling the dark, empty space around me. I blinked, somewhat startled, although pleasantly surprised to hear her so nearby

She always left after we had sex. Always. And I had never been man enough to stop her.

I wanted her, needed her, but I couldn't let go of the notion that I would lose her. Part of me thought, you know, why the hell not? She was my mate. We were meant for each other. I was hurting both of us by pushing her away.

But another part of me knew with every fiber of my being that I would lose her.

I could live in agony and break her heart over and over if it meant saving her life.

We'd kept it a secret, even from Maeve. Maeve would push, and push, and push us to make it official if she knew. The only person I had ever confided in was Aaron.

And all the sudden he was at the foot of my bed.

"Aaron?" I sat up, the sheets falling over my bare chest. I realized quite quickly that I was as naked as the day I was born. I moved my foot beneath the covers, my boxers dragging under the sheets because they were still wrapped around one ankle. And I noticed, as I scrunched my toes, that the lacey blue pair of underwear Gemma had been wearing, briefly, was stuffed in the sheets near the end of the mattress as well.

I blushed, then Gemma blushed, and Aaron quickly turned away as I gingerly reached far beneath the covers to retrieve the evidence of what we had been up to only an hour before.

But there was no smug smile on his face. Gemma's blush faded as I quickly, and discreetly, tossed her her underwear, which she shimmied into without even blinking.

Gemma looked up at me as she smoothed the fabric of her skirt, her neck moving as she swallowed. She looked scared to death.

"What's going on? Is someone hurt?" I looked from Gemma to Aaron, adrenaline prickling my fingertips as I threw the sheets back and stood, not caring that I was flashing everyone as I hastily pulled my boxers up to my waist.

"Ernest, I—"Gemma was in tears. She was trembling. She looked at Aaron, a silent plea etched all over her face. I looked at the clock on the far wall, the hands barely visible in the darkened room.

"What time is it? For the love of the Goddess, will someone turn on a light?"

"No, it stays dark," Aaron said with grave conviction, his face totally expressionless.

"Why?" I replied, pulling my shirt over my head and bending to fish for the pair of trousers I had been wearing. I pulled them from underneath the bed in time to see the fretful glance Gemma gave Aaron, something serious passing between them.

“No one is hurt. Not yet.”

“Not yet? Aaron-”

“It’s not Aaron. I’m not Aaron.”

I had only been in the tower a handful of times during my time as Alpha. I had seen Romero, heard his deranged, slightly senile ramblings before. He was just an old man, an ancient one, really. And he was serving a life sentence for war crimes that took place before I was even born.

But we were keeping him comfortable and well fed. Horace took care of everything. He had insisted. And now I knew why.

Aaron, or should I say Troy, had told me everything. He started from the beginning. He had arrived in Valoria around the time the real Aaron was set to arrive, spending the first few days in secret correspondence with Horace before showing up to the castle, where he pretended to be Maeve’s breeder.

It had been a ruse. Troy was working for the previously disbanded pack of Poldesse, the pack ruled by the Alpha Damian, who had taken over after Romero was imprisoned

But Troy hadn’t known the full weight of his mission until after he arrived. He hadn’t known of Poldesse’s impending invasion. He hadn’t known of Damian’s desire to conquer Valoria. He hadn’t known of Romero’s sinister plans for Maeve.

Troy had been blind to it all, a pawn, and a man desperate to free the only living relative he had left in the world.

Romero, his grandfather.

He would have done it too, he told me, if his mate wasn’t the same woman caught in the crosshairs of the entire scheme.

Chapter 25: Back to Finish the Job

Maeve

I believed him. I didn’t have a shadow of a doubt that he was telling the truth. I just knew. Troy had seen right through me from the very beginning. He had broken open the carefully constructed persona i had spent my life perfecting,

pulling me out of my abject, yet personally inflicted loneliness. I kept people away on purpose. I talked and talked until I could lull them into numbness and slip back into the shadows. But Aaron, I mean Troy, had not been the man described in Ethan's letters, no.

Troy had been my friend. I trusted him. And against all odds, I still did.

So, I followed him to the tower, Gemma following close behind as we crept through the castle in the pitch black of night. It was 2:00 in the morning, and despite Troy and Gemma's desperate pleas to rouse the castle, I protested, insisting that I'd face Romero myself.

Troy had a key, of course, being a spy and all, and together we climbed up the staircase to the top of the tower.

But when Troy opened the door to the circular room that had been Romero's home for two decades, none of us were prepared for what was on the other side.

"No!" Troy shouted as he lunged forward, pushing through the cell door that was unlocked and left ajar. The cell itself was a mess, the sparse furniture toppled over, and books scattered across the floor. Romero laid in a heap on the floor, naked, his body half-covered by a thin, shredded blanket he must have pulled off the bed.

"What the hell-" I whispered, looking around before casting a glance at Gemma, who stood statuesque, stunned into silence.

Troy was crouching next to Romero, reaching down to take the man's head into his hands.

But Romero jerked violently, letting out a surprised howl. All three of us jumped, Troy leaping backward away from the withered form of Romero and Gemma pulling me away from the door to the cell, her fingers digging into my forearm.

"I thought you were Horace," Romero croaked, his bloodied mouth dribbling as it stretched into a smile, "back to finish the job."

"Horace?" Troy said, looking around.

*You can still shift even when you're as old as the Goddess herself, boy." Romero turned his head and spit a tooth fragment onto the stone floor, spraying blood. But what do you think happens when two old, gnarled wolves fight in close quarters, hmm? Makes a mess as you can see." He laughed, blood gurgling wetly in his throat.

"Horace did this? Why?" Troy leaned back over Romero, who pointed a shaky finger at me.

"I see you told them."

"I wasn't going to let you,"

"Oh, I was the least of your problems, you idiot." Romero closed his eyes, wheezing. "That bastard Damian wants what I have. Horace was meant to get it -to get the-" He coughed, blood spraying across Troy's shirt. Troy leaned back, glancing over at me before looking back down at the man, who was laughing again.

"Get what?" Troy growled, growing impatient with obvious hatred in his voice.

"Look under the bed, pull it from the wall," Romero coughed, "there's a stone loose. Pull it out of the floor."

"Don't play games with me. We haven't much time-"

"I know that, boy. Do as I say."

Troy glanced at me again as if asking permission, and I nodded, not taking my eyes off Romero as Troy stood and pulled the little wooden cot away from the wall and reached behind it. A full minute passed before he pulled a stone the size of my head from the wall, placing it on the bed and glancing down at Romero before dramatically pulling the bed further from the wall.

"What were you doing? Trying to escape?" He said sarcastically as he bent behind the bed. But he stiffened suddenly, his shoulders going rigid as he straightened to his full height, turning around with a yellowed, rolled up piece of paper in his hands. "This is what Horace was looking for? What is it, an excerpt from your diary?"

I snorted, choking on a laugh Gemma jabbed me hard in the ribs.

“Open it and see,” Romero breathed, blood trickling from his mouth.

Troy unrolled the paper, smirking down at Romero as he did so. But as he looked over the worn, frayed document his face began to change, his eyes widening into perfect spheres. “Where did you get this?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“This is

this can’t be...”

“What is it?” I said, taking a step toward the cell door. Gemma pulled on my arm, stopping me from entering.

“It’s a map,” Troy swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat. He looked down at Romero, who had a wide smile plastered on his pale face. “It’s a map to Lycaon’s tomb.”

“Who’s Lycaon?” Gemma asked, peeking her head from behind my back.

“He was he was fabled to be the Moon Goddesses son. This can’t be real.” Troy was pouring over the map, his hands trembling slightly. “You were

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Chapter 25: Back to Finish the Job

planning to find the tomb, weren’t you? Where did you find this?”

“Consider it a family heirloom,” Romero said dismissively, his hand twitching as he tried to raise it to wave away Troy’s question,

“Why would Horace want this ? Troy asked, not looking away from the map.

“Because Damian wants it. He stole my-my-“Romero coughed violently, another spray of blood blanketed the floor around his head. He wheezed, turning his head from side to side. “Those witches.those white witches...”

“I think he’s dying!” Gemma said from behind my back.

I reached back, gently squeezing her arm.

Troy stepped over Romero, his eyes still firmly planted on the map. “What is he after?”

“A stone,” Romero said weakly, his eyes beginning to flutter, “a moonstone. He needs it for-for-” he let out a long, choked breath, struggling to breathe.

Troy looked down, crouching, his face only a mere foot from Romero’s.

“What does this have to do with Maeve?” Troy growled, the map clutched in one hand.

“Everything. She’s the key...” Romero’s eyes froze, his hand twitching as he slowly lifted it to touch Troy on the cheek, “Madalynn? Is that you—” he wheezed, then his hand dropped to the ground, his body going limp.

“What did he mean?” I asked hurriedly as we descended the stairs from the tower. I missed a step and nearly fell into Troy’s back as I tried to keep up with him.

“I don’t know. Lycaon’s tomb is a fable. Its existence is a myth. I doubt this is real-”

“You looked as though you were about to have a stroke-“Gemma was gripping the back of my shirt as we made our way down through the dark, her voice a mere whisper.

“I was surprised, that’s all. Romero is a.– was a crazy old man, that’s all. We have bigger problems.” Troy pulled open the door leading back onto the 5th floor of the castle, squinting down the hallway before waving me and Gemma out into the corridor. “We need to wake everyone up. Get the servants out-”

A strange feeling rippled through me, something I can only describe as finality. I held my hand up to interrupt him, waiting for him to fall silent. “Go to Maeve,” I said.

He looked stunned. “We have to-”

“You have to go to her. Gemma and I will take care of the rest. Go!” I demanded, the hair on my arms standing on end as I saw the flash of fear in his eyes

But he nodded, once, opening his mouth to speak and quickly shutting it again before turning away and disappearing into the darkness,

“What do we do now?” Gemma whispered.

I took her hand, knitting her fingers in mine.

“You’re my mate.” I said, squeezing her hand. A feeling of relief rushed through me as I said the words, months of tensions lifting from my muscles. “Whatever happens next, we get through it. Together.”

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 246

Chapter 26: It's Complicated

Hanna

Water. I was walking through it. No, on it, my feet covered by choppy, white-capped surf. I could hear her singing in the distance, the same lonely song

she always sang

Who are you? I asked, my voice echoing over the endless horizon, nothing but water for miles and miles.

But there it was the white building in the distance, the small, barren island rising above the sea. I looked up at the sun and moon, the two sitting next to each other, separated by a field of stars.

Who are you? I asked again, my steps quickening. I was running, my chest heaving with effort, but the building was still far, far away.

Please! Please wait for me!

But the water gave way beneath my feet, and I was submerged, floating down, deeper and deeper until the light from the surface of the waves disappeared.

Shrouded in darkness. Nothingness.

“Hanna!” she called, her voice watery and distant.

“I’m here!” I screamed, water flooding into my mouth, suffocating me. Please, I thought, stay asleep. Stay. Stay in the vision.

I tried to scream again, to bring her in. I could see her, a dark outline in the water, her hair twirling around her as she inched closer, and closer”:

I bolted upright in bed, water pouring from my mouth as I coughed and sputtered, reaching up to grip my throat that burned violently from the salt.

My bed was soaking wet, my nightgown sticking wetly to my skin as I retched, another burst of water running out of my mouth and down my neck and chest.

Learning to control this curse, or blessing, or whatever it was still seemed out of my grasp.

“Damn it!” I cried, exhausted. I reached up to wipe the tears rolling down my cheeks, hot against my chilled skin. I heard footsteps in the hallway and my bedroom door swung open, Kacidra’s figure filling the doorway.

She looked at me, terror and confusion etched into her face, the same look Dad always gave me, the same look he had always given Mom.

Kacidra stood for a moment, lingering with her hand on the doorknob before she closed the door again, her footsteps receding down the hallway and out of earshot

I let out a sob, reaching a shaking hand toward my bedside table and fishing in the drawer for the key I kept taped to its underside. I stood, my dress heavy as it fell around my knees, walking over to my closet and leaving wet footprints in my wake.

The journal was hidden among the tangle of thick jackets hanging in the closet. I reached into the emerald green coat, a piece that had once belonged to Mom, and pulled the thick, leather journal from the inner pocket, my hands trembling as I fumbled with the lock.

The key clicked into place, and the metal band that held the journal closed fell away, landing on the floor at my feet with a splash as it met with the water pooling beneath me.

I wrote it all down. Every single thing I remembered, just the way Mom had taught me. She said I could eventually control my dreams this way, elongate them, determine when and where I would wake.

But I was stuck. I had never made it out of this dream. I could never find my way forward, my way out.

I finished writing and retrieved the metal band, securing it back in place before taking out the key and putting it back in the coat.

I backed away from the closet, swallowing against the burning lump in my throat.

"I'm trying to get out of it, Mom!" I said in a whispered cry, sniffing like a child. "I don't know where the door is. I'm trapped in it. I don't understand why I don't understand what I need to do!"

Oh, if only Kacidra and Dad could hear me, and maybe they could. They would no doubt think I was even more deranged than they previously thought.

It was no wonder Dad was sending me away to marry Wrenn. I would join his pack, live amongst his people. My lucid dreams would no longer be my family's problem.

And I would marry Wrenn. I would get as far away as I could from Red Lakes and the stain of my mother's death that had a chokehold on my sister and father. The distance would free them, I thought. They would no longer be my keepers.

But not even an ocean could break the chain now wrapped around my soul that bound me to Rowan of Winter Forest.

Oh, how his arrival had thrown a wrench in my plans.

Wrenn was dumb. He always asked where I went swimming all the time, saying something crass about wanting to take me skinny dipping in the sulfur

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Chapter 26: It's Complicated

springs. He couldn't see the disdain behind my eyes. He couldn't peer into my mind and pull my innermost feelings and fears to the surface.

Rowan could, and he did. I don't think he even realized he was doing it, either.

The water dream started the day he arrived in Red Lakes, only hours after I felt the mate pull. His scent sent me over the edge, exhausting and overwhelming me to the point I had to lay down, to bury my face in my pillow and breathe in the smell of goose down and linen to try and rid myself of it. He smelled like green things, like walking through the redwood trees after a heavy rain. He smelled like the earth after a late spring snow, when the air was slightly too warm for it to stick, and the trees were heavy with it.

Rowan, My Rowan. My mate.

My father would never let me go with him to Winter Forest. I embarrassed Father. He wouldn't risk losing Ethan as an ally by allowing his insane daughter to set foot upon Ethan's territory. No, he would send Kacidra. Kacidra the beautiful. Kacidra the fit. Kacidra the normal.

I would go with Wrenn. I would find the way out of my dream, the door.

And I would never say a word to Rowan. Because the closer I got to him, the more challenging my dreams became.

Rowan

Kacidra was standing behind me, her blonde hair whipping in the salty wind coming off the water as the seaplane approached, its floats bobbing in the surf. "I've looked everywhere. I can't find her journal."

"It's been days, Kacidra!" I hissed, stealing a glance back at her before turning my head back to the plane, which was nearing the dock. "Why not just ask her about her dreams?"

"She won't tell me. I know she won't!"

"Have you tried?"

"Why don't you try talking to her, hmm?" She nudged me with her elbow, the force of it causing me to step forward. One of Eugene's warriors turned his head, giving me a curious look. I straightened up, watching the plane intently as it finally met the dock with an audible crunch.

"Sheesh. Some pilot you have, huh? He nearly took half the dock out-"

“It’s choppy.” I sneered, crossing my arms over my chest and watching the figures moving around the plane, my chest tightening with sudden longing as my dad stepped out onto the dock. I had missed him. I had never been away from home this long.

“Wow, Alpha Ethan looks exactly the same as he did when we visited Winter Forest.”

“I don’t even remember you being there, you know.” I said, knowing it would get a rise out of her. She nudged me with her elbow again, harder this time, and I momentarily lost my footing on the slippery rocks along the beach, pitching forward.

Dad looked up as he caught my movement out of the corner of his eyes, and I thought I might’ve seen a smile twitch across his face as he shook his head and handed a large duffle bag to a warrior to carry.

“He’s going to be able to tell we’re not mates, you know.” Kacidra said, matter-of-factly.

“How do you know that?”

“He’s family. Rowan, Family can always tell.”

“I don’t think that’s true, Kass.” I swallowed, hoping she was wrong. I didn’t want to have that conversation with him. Not right now, at least. Not until I was able to actually say something, anything, to Hanna first.

I had been in Red Lakes for a month and found my mate, who just happened to be the little sister to the woman I was betrothed to, and I hadn’t even said a single word to her yet. How the hell was I going to explain that?

“Here he comes!” she teased, flicking me on the back of the head.

“Shut up!”

“Rowan!” Dad waved, his voice carrying across the beach as he walked along the boardwalk. I walked forward, meeting him halfway. I was fighting the boyish urge to run to him, my hands clenched at my sides. Dad had never been a very physically affectionate father, at least not after Maeve and I reached our adolescence. I desperately wished Mom was here. She was a hugger. I missed her terribly.

“How’s Mom?” I asked, taking Dad’s hand in a firm handshake. His blue eyes scanned my face, then looked passed me to Kacidra, who was leaning casually against the railing of the boardwalk.

“Your mom’s fine. Worried about Maeve, but fine overall.”

“Worried about Maeve? Why?”

“Still no word from Valoria.”

“Really? That’s... that’s very unlike her.”

Dad nodded, clapping me on the shoulder as we began to walk up the boardwalk toward Kacidra. “We can talk more about it later.”

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Chapter 26: It’s Complicated

“Okay.”

“Kacidra! You’ve grown at least a foot since I last saw you.”

Kacidra beamed, her eyes shining in the soft morning sunlight. “Hello, Alpha King Ethan. It’s nice to see you again.” “Ethan is just fine, thanks.” Dad smiled. But suddenly his smile weakened, his gaze moving from Kacidra back to me. I could feel it on the side of my face, his eyes boring into my temples as though he were trying to read my mind.

swallowed, looking over at kacidra, who had a smug smile on her face. I wanted nothing more than to toss her over the railing into the water at that moment. “Should we go up?” she asked, motioning toward the pathway leading up into the village.

“Sure, after you.” Dad motioned for her to lead us but kept in step with me, the two of us shoulder to shoulder. “So,” he said, glancing up at kacidra to make sure she was far enough ahead to be out of earshot. “You met your mate.”

“How did you know?”

“And,” he continued, fixing me with a knowing gaze, “it’s not Kacidra, is it?”

“It’s not”

*Well,” he said, clicking his tongue, “we’ll have to do something about that won’t we?”

“I’m supposed to marry Ka-”

“Your mother would kill me—”

“Dad, look, it’s complicated.”

-Amate? Complicated?” He laughed, his eyes twinkling with mirth. “Try me.”

“I have too much money to blend in,” I said honestly, sitting down behind my desk and placing the parcel on its surface.

“It’s William, by the way.”

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 247

Chapter 27: Do What You Must

Keaton

Robbie rolled the cigarette between his fingers in the shelter of his coat, tucking it behind his ear as we watched the rusted fishing boat approach. I gave Robbie a look, tilting my head toward the vessel.

“Looks like only a fishin’ boat, Cap.”

“Aye, but in such shallow waters, and in this storm?” I turned my head to look back at the shore of the small cove that was currently our refuge from the raging open waters. Rain was pounding the decks, bouncing off the wood panels and rolling off the sails above our heads. The thick trees hanging over the sandy cliff face were inundated with rain, their thick leaves hanging toward the murky green water.

“She’s headed right for us, Cap.”

I sighed, smacking my lips and pushing away from the railing, giving the approaching ship one last look before clapping him on the shoulder. “Guess we’ll see what her crew wants then, shall we?”

I descended the stairs to the lower deck, nodding at my crew as I passed them. We were anchored, the sails drawn in and the crew at leisure, at least for the moment. We would not be docking in Valoria tonight, not with twelve-foot swells preventing us from crossing the channel.

Young Pete stood at the lower railing, watching the ship with a pair of binoculars as it rocked in the waves, "They're dropping a rowboat!" His voice was edged with excitement as he leaned over the railing.

"You'll fall in," I said, grabbing the back of his shirt and pulling him off the railing. "That's a right way to die, lad."

"I was just-" He paused, forgetting himself. "Yes, Captain."

I patted him on the chest and turned toward the railing, watching as three men began to battle the waves in the small skiff, their oars beating helplessly against the unforgiving sea.

"No shifting on the boat, remember?" I turned to Young Pete, the newest member of our crew. He nodded, his head bobbing up and down as he did so. He was just a pup, really, freshly twenty-one and full of the angst and adrenaline all young men possessed when they finally came into their powers. I never took pollywogs so young, but Pete had nearly begged on his knees for the opportunity.

Looking for his mate, most likely. What better way to find a mate than by mopping floors on a smuggling ship for a few months?

I turned to Robbie, my second in command. He was leaning on the railing, watching the three men struggling to close in on the *Persephone*.

"Should we go out and help em', you think?"

"No," I said dryly, wiping rainwater from my brow. "We'll only lower the ladder for them when they get close."

What in the hell did these three fools want?

It took them nearly an hour to reach us, all of them red-faced and steaming with heat when they finally climbed over the railing and put their water logged boots down on the ship.

An older man stepped forward, breathing heavily as he reached into the pocket of his coat. He was an “Old Salt,” someone who had been working on ships for the majority of his life. He walked like it, talked like it, and had the signature deep tan of someone who spent their days working in the salty, harsh reflection of the sun coming off the water.

“I don’t think so. pal.” Robbie drew a long knife from his belt, holding it out in front of him. The two younger men who had accompanied the old man on the trek shifted uncomfortably, wariness etched across their sunburnt faces.

“Mean you no harm,” the old man said as he pulled a damp parcel out of his coat, holding it up in surrender. “Someone paid a pretty penny to have this delivered to you in this shitstorm.”

“Aye, would you look at that? It’s only the post.” I took the parcel from the old man as I looked around at my crew, who were standing in a semicircle around the three men. Muffled laughter rang out, drowned out by the rain. “Take the boys to the galley, feed em’,” I said, motioning to my crew.

The old man nodded to his companions to heed my orders and they reluctantly followed the crew through the wide doors leading to the lower levels of the ship. I motioned for the old man to follow me to my own quarters.

“Quite a place you got here,” the man said, looking up to admire the murals painted on the ceiling of my spacious lodgings. His eyes danced over the gold painted trim and ceiling-high bookshelves. “First editions?” he asked pointing to a glass-covered section of the bookshelf.

“What kind of pirate would I be if they weren’t?”

The man chuckled, shaking his head. “I’ve heard things about this ship. I assumed it was all an exaggeration. A real pirate ship on the seas, huh? You don’t exactly blend in.”

Chapter 27: Do What You Must

“Aye, I know who you are. One of the port master’s runners, are you?”

He nodded, tilting his head toward the parcel. “He said a young man came into the pub in the early evening asking about the Persephone, when you’d make port. Paid a steep price to have one of our ships come out in the storm

to find you. I thought you'd be waiting in open waters like the rest of the ships, waiting for the storm to roll inland."

"We rode in with it." I answered, using my fingernails to open the soggy parcel. There was a paper napkin inside, crumpled and the ink smeared but still legible I held it up to the light. "How long ago did the man write this, exactly?"

*Not but four hours ago."

I stood, hands trembling slightly as I folded the napkin and put it in my pocket. It was from Troy. He was asking for us to wait in Valoria for him. He had written the first part of the note in clear, neat print.

But a second note, scribbled almost illegibly at the bottom of the napkin, was written in panic, the pen he had used poking holes and dragging the fibrous paper in some spots.

Damian's fleet is here. They'll make port by tomorrow morning. They plan to invade. Don't get involved, cut your engines and stay hidden. Stay in the waters off Valoria and I will come to you.

"Let me show you to the galley. You and your men can stay the night-"

William shook his head, tilting toward the door leading out of the captain's quarters. "I gotta get back before the dock is swarmed with the delayed boats. I'll let em' eat then we have to go."

I nodded, thankful they would take their leave. Troy never acted out of panic, never. He was as level-headed as they come. Something was about to happen though; I could feel it coming through the words in his note as I read them.

I reached into my desk drawer and pulled out a small sack of coins and gems, picking a few coins out of the purse as I stood, dropping them into William's open palm.

I followed him out of the captain's quarters in silence, shielding my face from the rain with my hand as he walked across the deck and through the doors leading down to the galley.

Once William disappeared behind the doors, I motioned to Robbie, who was still standing near the railing, watching the fishing vessel rock in the waves roughly a half mile from where we were anchored.

He followed me back into the captain's quarters where I quickly locked the door behind us, squeezing the water from my hair as I took a seat behind my desk once more.

"Change of plans," I said quickly, reaching for and unrolling a large map of the coast of Valoria across my desk.

Robbie leaned against the desk, looking down at it.

"We are moving further inland."

Inland? How?" Robbie peered at the map, his brow arched as he followed my finger along it.

"This is likely an estuary. We anchor here, and this river here," I pointed, running my finger along the river's winding form, "meets up with the Great River of Valoria, here."

"Why-"

"We're not going to the port." I said quickly, reaching into my desk for the box of stick pins and marking our route. "We're going to send out two skiffs, one to the port and one up river."

"Does this have to do with the man-"

"Troy is in trouble somehow. He didn't elaborate. Something about Damian and his fleet-"

"Damian's fleet? What the hell does he need a fleet for?"

I looked up at Robbie, my face giving away the answer.

"No,"

"Yes, he means to invade."

"I thought that was just a rumor."

“Well, it was. For years, if I remember correctly.” I scratched my head, pulling Troy’s note from my pocket and handing it to Robbie. “I’m guessing he saw the logs from the port master. They have an entire day’s worth of scheduled ships stuck beyond the channel while this storm pushes inland.”

“But, how would Damian get his entire fleet through the port without raising questions from the Alpha of Drogomor and his warriors?”

“He likely has only one ship scheduled to make landfall, Robbie. Troy must have seen the log when he was searching for the Persephone. It’s a decoy ship, no doubt.”

Robbie leaned back, his wide, thickly bearded face drawn with confusion. “How did we not know about this? I thought the plan was to pick Troy up two weeks from now, after we return from the next port.”

“Damian didn’t tell us for a reason. He will know we were scheduled to be docking in Valoria, however. That’s why we need to stay hidden. His ships won’t come this far east to look for us, as long as we keep our engines off so they can’t pick us up on their radar.”

“Full sail then, eh?” Robbie’s mouth twitched into a smile as I nodded, excitement bubbling to the surface of my consciousness.

“Have a skiff dropped, send two men to the port. Once there, have them keep an eye out for Troy. I’m not sure if he’ll make it to the port if Damian is able to push through the storm. In that case, he’ll use the river as his guide to get to the sea. We ride full sail to the next cove and anchor, and send another skiff up the river.

“And if we run into Damian’s warriors?” Arlo narrowed his eyes.

I could see his desires behind his gaze. It had been weeks since any of the crew had been able to shift. He was anxious, full of pent-up energy.

“You do what you need to do, Arlo, you and the rest of the crew. We are not part of Poldesse. Troy is who we are fighting for. Do what you must.”

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 248

Chapter 28: The Rejected Mate

Ethan

Rowan's chestnut hair was falling around his face, casting long shadows over our sharp, shared features. Looking at him was almost like looking in a mirror sometimes but with lighter, wavier hair. He had my build and my height, and there had been times when someone had approached him from behind, thinking it was me, and vice versa.

But he had his mother's emotionally driven personality. He was sensitive, shy, and somewhat boyish in demeanor. I had hoped sending him to Red Lakes would break him out of it.

But as we sat in Rowan's lodgings, a big log cabin overlooking a large bluff leading down to the sea below, I could see I had been very, very wrong.

Kacidra was sitting on the other side of the living room, her hands folded in her lap. She was the one Rowan was supposed to marry. And judging by the look on her face as she gazed at him, her blonde brows knitted in a tight frown, she wasn't all too pleased about it. Neither was Rowan.

"What happens if she rejects me?" Rowan was picking at the seam of his jeans, his light blue eyes downcast and focused on everything, and nothing, at all once.

"It's supposed to be dreadfully painful," Kacidra quipped, but she quickly shut her mouth and looked at the floor as I gave her a stern, fatherly look of disapproval.

I would give anything to see Kacidra and Maeve go head-to-head.

"Are you certain you're being rejected?" I asked, scanning his face. Rowan shrugged, looking up to glance at Kacidra.

"Hanna hasn't spoken a word to him since he's been here," she said, but then bit her lip, shaking her head.

"She's said one word to me-"

"Rowan, don't-"

I watched them, an unspoken exchange passing between the two youngsters as they glared at one another. "What exactly is going on around here?"

“Do you want to tell him, or should I?” Rowan peered over at Kacidra, who significantly paled.

“I don’t think we should,”

“We could use his help, Kass. Please.”

Kacidra sucked in her breath, looking from Rowan to me. I was growing impatient with them, the two of them having been so secretive since I had arrived in Red Lakes the day before. I had been missing Rowan and was excited and incredibly shocked to see his progress on the solar farm when I arrived. The entire project was nearly complete. The crew in charge was busy running lines to the buildings and houses in the village, with Rowan overseeing everything

Oh, yes, Rowan would get his radio towers. He had earned them.

And Rowan should have been excited about that, but he was forlorn and distracted, constantly in the company of Kacidra, who hovered around him like an anxious bird, her eyes wide and mouth at his ear.

I had made it clear within an hour of arriving that I had no expectations that they would marry, unless they chose to go through with it. Rowan had found his mate. Kacidra had no interest in marrying Rowan and sacrificing her own happiness in the event she found her mate in the future. Rosalie and I wouldn’t force them into a union, even if Eugene demanded it.

Rowan could, and would, marry Hanna. She was his mate, after all. Their marriage would still unite our packs.

“My sister sees things,” Kacidra said, matter-of-factly.

“Oh?” I leaned back in my chair, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Visions, Dad.”

“I see.”

“No, you don’t. Look-we-“Rowan paused, closing his eyes for a moment as he gathered his thoughts. It was something I had seen Rosalie do on occasion. If Maeve favored me in physical looks and personality, Rowan heavily favored my wife..

“Hanna is rarely ever lucid, Alpha Ethan.” Kacidra swallowed, her neck moving against the words. She was nervous. “Please don’t tell my father I’m telling you this.”

“Why?” I asked, genuinely curious.

“Because he plans to send her away. She’s betrothed, you know, to a man from another pack.”

“Ah, the man named Wrenn who everyone in the village has been talking about, I presume?”

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Chapter 28: The Rejected Mate

well, he needs to send her away, or so he thinks. Something about this place

“Yeah.. that’s the one,” she growled, shaking her head. “My father wants to it just do you remember my mother at all, Alpha Ethan?”

“I do. How could I forget?”

Rowan snorted, crossing his knee over his leg as he leaned back in the chair. Kacidra pinkened and inhaled deeply.

“She saw things too. Her dreams were at their worst in her last few months of life. She she was very close with Hanna. Hanna was especially devastated by her death but.. but after Mom passed away, Hanna began to have dreams. She started sleep-walking; dream dancing is what Mom called

“And you think this is getting in the way of her bond with Rowan?”

“Yes, I am certain of it. But...”

“She said my name when she was sleep-walking, I mean, dream dancing,” Rowan said quickly, his cheeks flushed with color.

“She doesn’t ever talk when she’s dreaming, so it was significant.”

“But people dream all the time? In fact, I had a dream last night-“I began, but was quickly interrupted by Kacidra, her face drawn in frustration.

“It’s not the same. I guarantee that it’s not the same. She goes somewhere, I think. And not in this not in this plane, if that makes sense,” Kacidra said.

“It doesn’t, but-“I began.

“She keeps a journal. Kacidra and I have been looking for it for the past week,” Rowan cut in, giving Kacidra a sober smile.

“I think she writes down her dreams in it. My mother kept a dream journal. My father has it. He never let me see, but she would have taught Hanna to do the same thing, I know it,” kacidra explained.

“I’m not sure what you’re trying to say,” I looked from one to the other, my eyes narrowed as I tried to understand. “I don’t feel the mate bond with her when she’s dreaming, Dad. And she dreams almost constantly,” Rowan told me.

“It got worse after Rowan arrived, Alpha Ethan. It wasn’t nearly so frequent before,” Kacidra said.

“If we can find her journal,” Rowan explained, we might know why she’s why she’s-” He looked down at his hands, shrugging helplessly.

“Why she’s stuck,” kacidra finished, sighing deeply as she looked up at me expectantly. They both were looking at me, in fact, as though I had all the answers.

I blinked, shifting my gaze from Kacidra to Rowan. They were both serious about this, I could tell. “Well, what do we do? You are asking for my help by telling me this aren’t you?”

“I guess so, yeah. We are, aren’t we Rowan?”

Rowan nodded in response to Kacidra’s question, biting the inside of his cheek.

Oh, Goddess. I wished Rosalie were here.

“My dad will send her away before”

“I won’t allow that. My alliance with your father will be cemented by the unions of our children, even after”

“I won’t do that to Kacidra, Dad. What happens when she finds her mate?” Rowan snapped, his hands clenching into fists on his lap. Kacidra was surprised by his outburst, her mouth slightly ajar as she gawked at him.

“You won’t be marrying Kacidra, Rowan, not any.”

Someone was yelling outside of the cabin, their voice carried by the stiff breeze coming off the water. There was more shouting, and several people ran by outside of the bay windows on the opposite wall from where we sat.

Rowan leaned forward in his chair, peering at the shadows racing past behind the curtains. Kacidra stood, concern lining her features, “I have to-”

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 249

Chapter 29: Nameless But Not Blameless

Maeve

“Aaron?” I said into the dark as my door opened and closed, a shadowed figure moving through the room toward my bed. I sat up, pulling the sheets over my bare chest.

I blinked rapidly to adjust my eyes to the darkness. A drawer squeaked as it was roughly opened, the sound of fabric falling to the ground overwhelmed by murmured curses.

“I thought you weren’t coming back until tomorrow.” I said, scooting to the side of the bed and slipping my legs out of the sheets. “What are you doing?”

“Get dressed, Maeve. We have to go.”

“Go where?” I laughed, standing and reaching over to my bedside table to turn on the lamp. Yellow light filled the room, washing over his face. “Aaron, what’s wrong?”

“Turn off the lamp, right now!” he exclaimed, panic flashing in his eyes.

He was filthy, and his clothes were damp and smelled sharply of rainwater and dust. He had dark circles beneath his eyes, and he looked exceedingly wary. I stepped forward, narrowing my eyes as I closed in on him, ignoring his demand.

He had blood on his shirt. Lots of it.

“Aaron?”

“That’s not my name, Maeve.”

I froze, any warmth I felt by his presence evaporating into thin air and leaving me feeling suddenly exposed. I crossed my arms over my breasts, not taking my eyes off of his. “What kind of game is this? Why are you covered in blood?”

“My name is Troy.” He took a step forward, his eyes boring into mine. I opened my mouth to speak, but the only sound that escaped was a choked laugh.

“Okay, Troy.” I said sarcastically. But he looked at me, coldly, his eyes vibrant gems in the lamplight.

“Turn off the lamp, Maeve. I’m serious.”

“Not until you tell me why you’re covered in blood.” i felt the sudden urge to step away from him. Troy? Who the hell was Troy? All the suspicions I had had about him came rushing forward as I looked over his face, the face I hadn’t recognized. The eyes that seemed so new, so incredibly unique. And his chest, scarless, when I knew it shouldn’t be. “You’re not Aaron, are you?”

“I’m not. I never have been. Aaron is on an island somewhere. He’s safe. He’ll be returned to his family.”

“I don’t understand,” I said, an edge to my voice. “Why are you here?”

“A mission,” he said as he took another step, his hands outstretched in a show of surrender. “I didn’t come here to be your breeder. I never meant to even touch you. I was here to free Romero from the tower.”

“Who?” I took a step away from him.

that was me. Troy. Not Aaron. !

“I need you to listen to me. I need you to know that everything that has happened between us, everything meant everything I’ve ever said and done with you.”

I gaped at him, a strange feeling beginning to well in the pit of my stomach.

“I love you,” he said earnestly, the words echoing in my ears. I felt bile rising in my throat, the fight-or-flight response rippling across my skin.

“Don’t say that to me. Don’t you dare say that to me. You lied to me, you’ve been lying this entire time-”

“Gemma was right all along, Maeve. I know you had your own suspicions. I don’t have the scar, do I? That’s because I never fell out of a tree when I was a kid. I’ve never been to Winter Forest. We met for the first time that day in the market.”

I had been right all along. He had trapped me in his web of deceit. Everything he had said to me, everything he had done to convince me..

“Leave my room, now!”

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Chapter 29: Nameless But Not Blameless

“Do you know why I took off after I met you in the market? Because I wanted you. I sought you out of the crowd. You pulled me in. I didn’t know who you were. Then you were not who I wanted you to be—

The light abruptly shut off, and all around us the electric hum of the castle powered down, blanketing us in a dark, complete silence. His face changed, panic and confusion lining his face as he tensed, looking slowly towards the door. I felt his fear. The downy hairs on my arms stood on end as the sounds of rushing footsteps echoed through the corridors below. Something was wrong. Very, very wrong.

“What’s happening,” I was interrupted by the sound of Troy struggling to pull my dresser along the wall and positioning it against the door, preventing it from opening. I heard the shared door open and a similar scraping sound

coming from his room. He came back into my room, bending to the ground and tossing a simple cotton dress at me. Then he walked to the bed and pulled off the sheets.

“What are you doing?”

“Get dressed, Maeve, we don’t have much time.” He was ripping the sheet into strips, cursing under his breath as he wound and knotted the strips together to form a makeshift rope.

“We don’t have much time for what? If you think barricading me in this room is going to stop me from screaming for help-” Voices echoed from below, skril commands. Doors began to open and shut, exclamations of surprise and then terror cutting through the still air of the castle.

Suddenly, he was in front of me, gripping my upper arms so tightly I could feel his fingernails pinching my skin. “Don’t make a sound!”

I pushed against him, slamming my fists into his chest. He grabbed the back of my head, twisting his fingers into my hair and pulling me into a kiss so intense it made me feel a rush of warmth that blurred my senses long enough to drown out the first piercing scream that ripped through the air.

He broke away from the kiss, his lips lightly brushing against mine as another scream echoed from somewhere on the lower levels.

He let me go, pushing me away and reaching down for the dress.

“Put it on, now!”

Screaming continued to sound from below, followed by muffled snarling and yelping. I was frozen in place as the sounds of chaos and destruction began to reverberate through the castle, snapping back to reality as Troy pulled the dress over the top of my head, catching a lock of my hair and pulling it unintentionally. “Ouch!”

His hand flew over my mouth. “Shut up!” he said as spun me around, so my back was against his chest. He backed us away from the door as the sound of footsteps began to sound in the hallway and the incessant shrieking from below grew louder.

“We have to go. We’re going to climb down-”

“MAEVE!” Gemma cried; her voice filled with panic. She was pounding on the door, her fearful sobs cutting through the sound of violence echoing through the castle.

I fought against Troy’s hold on me, elbowing him hard in the chest, which caused him to loosen his grasp enough for me to be free of him and run toward the door. I pushed against the dresser, but it was stuck in place, caught on the carpet. “Help me, Troy!”

He was standing there, stock still. His eyes were on the door as Gemma continued to hammer on it with her fists.

“Gemma! I’m trying!” I cried, hot tears rolling down my eyes. “Troy, help me! Please!”

Suddenly, her fists left the door and the only sound from her was a few choked sobs. “Troy? Are you there?” Gemma said, oddly calm.

“I am.”

“You have to get her out. Promise me.”

“I promise. I promise you, Gemma.”

“Troy?” I turned to him, fire blazing in my eyes. “She knows?”

“Maeve, listen to me,” Gemma said in a desperate whisper. “You have to go with him. Please. You have to trust me.”

“I’m not going anywhere without you!” I screamed, desperately pushing against the dresser. She was crying softly now, her sobs muffled by the door separating us. I began to pull the drawers out of the dresser, my hands clawing the wood as I pulled and pushed and screamed out in frustration. “Help me!”

“Troy, you have to go now. You have to get out. The tunnels, they came through the tunnels. We’re overrun.”

“I’ll get her out.”

“Get her out of Valoria. Get far from here. They’re looking for her. They’re—they’re killing everyone—” Gemma’s voice was drowned out by a crashing

sound, followed by shattering glass and the menacing yelps of wolves coming up the stairwell down the hall. “Go, go now! I can’t hold them off for long.”

“NO!” I screamed, beating my fists against the dresser. “HELP ME, YOU BASTARD!”

Troy wrapped his arms around my chest, pinning my arms to my sides as I writhed and kicked his shins with my heels.

“I love you, Maeve. I love you,” Gemma sobbed, her voice breaking.

I screamed, bucking forward, which caused him to drop me, his body falling on top of mine.

“GEMMA!” I clawed at the carpet as he caught me by the ankles, dragging me further from the door, my fingernails digging into the carpet as he pulled me toward him. He lifted me, crushing me to the wall next to the window and holding me there while he wound the makeshift bed sheet rope around his arm, taking me around the waist by the other.

I heard her being ripped apart. Her screams faded and were overwhelmed by the sound of snarling and snapping jaws. The last scream had to give was ripped from my mouth as he broke through the glass of the window, pulling me up onto the sill.

“Do you trust me?”

“F*ck you.”

And then he jumped.

Troy

I was dizzy, turning my head and retching violently into the hedges we had landed in. I fought against the twisted branches of the scrubs, the arm I had wound the sheet around was broken and bent in an impossible angle. I could hear Maeve trying to catch her breath, gasping as she tried to move against the shrubbery. “Are you okay?” I asked through gritted teeth. She went totally still.

Then she rolled out of the scrub, falling flat on her face onto the grass and groaning painfully as she spit grass from her mouth.

“Don’t you dare—”

She was running before I could even blink. I rolled out of the bush like she had, biting my lip until I nearly bit clean through it to stop myself from screaming out in pain as I landed on my broken arm. I got up, vomited, then limped after her.

She had turned the corner, heading toward the kitchen garden and the door leading into the servant’s hall and kitchen. I hissed her name, cursing her under my breath as I jogged along, dragging a violently twisted ankle and clutching my mangled arm to my chest as I followed her around the side of the castle.

And then I saw them, standing near the entrance of the kitchen garden. Ernest had Gemma’s body draped over his arms, holding her as though she was weightless. Maeve raised her hand, blood dripping down her wrist as she reached over to Gemma.

“Don’t—” Ernest pushed Maeve away, sidestepping away from her. Maeve lunged at him, her bloody hand coming down on Gemma’s chest with an audible thud, leaving streaks of crimson across her friend’s clothes and jewelry. Ernest pushed Maeve away again, hard enough for her to stumble and fall onto her knees. “Leave her, Maeve. It’s too late.”

“I can help her—”

“Go.” Ernest gripped Gemma, bringing her body into his chest and cradling her.

“Ernest, wait. Come with us.” I reached out to him, but he passed by, dodging my touch.

“Get her out of here, Troy.”

“Come with us, please.” I was ready to beg, but he looked me in the eyes. His eyes were lifeless. There was nothing there.

“I can’t leave her. I won’t.”

“I understand,” I said softly, backing away. Maeve was watching the exchange, her face stained with tears and her mouth slightly open, but silent.

Ernest walked away from us, disappearing into the darkness of the field of tall grass with his lifeless mate clutched to his chest.

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 250

Chapter 30: You Let Her Die!

Maeve

“Get away from me!”

I was running, frantic, tripping and stumbling through the dense greenbelt that lay between the castle ground and the village below. There was noise all around me; screaming, shouting, the eerie high-pitched howl of wolves.

I could hear him behind me, his breath catching in his throat as he cursed aloud, begging me to stop.

“You’re running right into it, Maeve. You need to stop for a minute. We need to come up with a plan to get to the port-”

“I’m not going anywhere with you!” My face was tight from my dried tears as I spoke.

“Look around!” he bellowed as he clutched me by the shoulder, pulling me to a stop. I could tell by the tone of his voice that he was in incredible pain. One arm was dangling at his side, bent and bleeding profusely from a terrible, protruding fracture in his forearm. I should help him, heal him.

No. I wouldn’t. He was as good as dead to me.

But he was right; fire was blazing in the village. We could see the amber light through the trees and the smoke beginning to drift into the canopy of leaves over our heads.

I turned to him as his hand left my shoulder. He cradled his arm again, his chest heaving with effort.

“Who the f*ck are you?” I said, unable to hide the heartbreak in my voice.

He shook his head, sweat dripping off his jaw as he bent forward, leaning into a tree for support. "I'm really hurt, Maeve. I can't shift like this. I thought we had more time."

"More time for what, Troy? If that's even your real name-"

"It is."

"What is happening right now? What happened to Gemma?" My voice cracked as I said her name. I hadn't processed it yet. Everything that had happened within the last half hour was a total blur, only little fragments of memory floating around in my mind. But Gemma's screams were clear. They were still ringing in my ears.

* Alpha Damian of Poldesse is invading. He's taking over Drogomor."

"Why? Is that why you're here?"

"No. At least, I didn't know this was his plan. I thought," he swayed, pitching forward. I felt my body moving to help him without my permission, but I righted myself, my fingers curling into fists. "Romero he-Damian used me. I was a decoy to keep you and Ernest distracted while he made his move."

"What does this have to do with me? I'm not the Luna yet-"

He looked up at me, his eyes shining with unimaginable pain, "Damian wants you for something I don't understand. Romero was in on it, he tried to explain it to me but I thought he was just a mad old fool, I-"

A scream ripped through the air around us and I jumped, startled.

"We don't have time for this. I'll explain later. I can't think straight. I need to get you to the river," he said.

"I already said I'm not going anywhere with you." I started to walk forward again, grinding my teeth as my skin prickled with mingled guilt and fury. I didn't need him. I could figure things out on my own, right?

"I need to get you to my ship. You're not safe in Valoria. All of Damian's men will be looking for you."

“You let her die,” I said, turning around to face him once more. “She was right there. She was just behind the door, and you didn’t help. You didn’t do a f*cking thing.”

“They would have killed her regardless. They would have killed me, too. They would have taken you to Damian, and I am certain your fate would have been worse. I did it to protect you-”

“That wasn’t your decision to make.” I swallowed a sob, blinking back a fresh batch of hot tears.

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Chapter 30: You Let Her Die!

“We have to go, Maeve, We can’t talk about this now.”

“And then what? I just – trust you? Let you take me to your ship? Where exactly are we going to go, Troy?”

“You have to trust me.”

“I don’t-”

*Then trust that I will keep you safe, Maeve. I will reunite you with your family.”

“And what about Ernest? He’s my family. He’s out here all alone”

Fire flashed in Troy’s eyes for a second, then he looked away, hurt lining his face. “Ernest wants to be on his own. He doesn’t need us to help him do what he needs to do.”

“What does he-”

“He just lost his mate,” he said. “I have no way of describing to you what that feels like. You wouldn’t understand.”

“Neither would you!”

He looked into my face, searching for something behind my eyes. “I do know. I know what it feels like to find your mate. To lose her.”

“Oh?” I felt ill as a sudden rush of jealousy rippled through my system. I swallowed it down, praying it didn’t show on my face as he continued to watch me.

Almost lose her,” he continued, lowering his gaze before struggling to push himself off the tree. “Let’s go, please. I don’t have a lot of time left.”

“Time? What are you-” I looked at him, my gaze leaving his face and settling on the blood-soaked sleeve of his shirt. He was pale, his eyes hazy and sunken.

I bit my lip, inhaling deeply as I bit down even harder, enough to draw blood.

And then I took his face between my hands and kissed him.

“Goodbye, Aaron,’ I thought as he opened his mouth to mine. Nothing would ever be the same after this. Every feeling, every touch had been a lie. The man met in the market was gone. The man who teased me, who tossed me in the grass and ran his fingers down the rise of my hips while we laid naked in the library was gone. A ghost. A figment of my imagination.

And I knew my powers were weak. My own wounds from our fall from the fourth-story window were slow to heal. The minuscule amount of blood I had given him might have been enough to take the edge off his pain, give him enough strength to lead us to the river and guide us to the port.

But his arm would still be broken. His ankle would continue to swell. He wouldn’t be able to shift and function with only two of his limbs in working order.

He pulled out of the kiss, his face tilted up to the sky as he breathed in, closing his eyes.

*Never touch me again,” I whispered, my heart shattering to pieces.

Old Town was in chaos as we pushed through the smoke. I was supporting Troy, his good arm wrapped around my shoulder and his broken arm tied to his chest in a sling I had made from his shirt.

The market stalls were only embers now. The old stone buildings were being licked by flames, and their thatch roofs blackened and fell in, showering the street in sparks of heat.

People ran by us as we made our way down the center of the road, unintelligible shadows amongst the smoke.

Johnny's Bar was up in flames, the covered porch cracking and collapsing on itself.

Damian would inherit ruin, not a pack. Not like this.

"Maeve?" came a scream from the smoke-filled street ahead of us. A figure limped out of the smoke, her long gray hair billowing out behind her like a cloak as she helped her burden along.

"Cleo? Myla?" I almost dropped Troy in surprise. He was barely conscious at this point, his head bobbing against my shoulder.

I could see what was once their home through the smoke, flames totally engulfing it. Violent thunder boomed over our heads, drowning out Cleo's reply

"We need to get to the river, now," Troy said hoarsely, shaking his head.

*Cleo! Hurry! Come with me!" I waved my free hand as they approached, Myla hanging off of Cleo much like Troy was hanging off of me.

"Where? Everything is on fire. I tried to get to the train station, but it was blocked."

"The river. We're going to the river!" I cried out over the sound of toppling buildings. Cleo nodded in understanding, looking down at Myla, her face lined with concern.

"Myla is barely holding on—"

"I know. I'll help her. As soon as we can find a boat, okay?"

We limped through the smoke-filled streets, a storm brewing over our heads. People were running around us, some shifted and snarling, some in human form screaming, the sounds growing louder as we neared the train station.

Wolves were everywhere. It was impossible to tell who was friend or foe.

The river was tucked behind a row of buildings near the train station. I could hear it before I could see the red gleam of the water as it reflected off the flames. By some miracle, a small skiff was rocking in the river's current, tied to a post that hadn't yet caught fire.

Troy was able to grasp the side of the skiff as I helped him into it. He cried out in pain, holding onto me for dear life as I eased him inside. Cleo waded into the water behind me, Myla clutched to her chest as if she weighed nothing. –

“I barely got her out of the house, Maeve. She was asleep. She can't breathe.”

“I know, it's going to be okay.”

I pulled Myla onto the boat, laying her down next to Troy, and then pulled Cleo aboard. Cleo held Myla's head steady as I lifted up my arm.. pressing the exposed cut to Myla's lips as the blood began to flow.

My blood had done barely anything to help Troy. I prayed it would at least keep Myla alive for another hour or so until we could ride the river's swift current to the port.

A few minutes had passed, and I didn't notice Cleo's absence until Troy let out a blood-curdling scream. I turned, the hair standing up on the back of my neck as Cleo clutched his broken arm, twisting it until an audible crunching sound reverberated throughout the boat. Troy was panting, sweat pouring down his face as he shook his head, silently pleading with her to stop.

“You dislocated your shoulder too, honey,” she said gently, cautiously reaching for his elbow, “I have to set it back in place or-”

“No, no-”

“Maeve, hold him down!”

I let go of Myla and threw myself on Troy just as Cleo pushed with all of her might on his elbow, twisting his mangled arm as she did so.

There was a sharp popping sound, and then he passed out, his eyes rolling back in his head as he slumped into Cleo, who gently laid him back against the back of the skiff.

“He’ll feel better when he wakes up,” she said as she swiftly redid the sling, tilting her head toward the steering wheel. “Do you know how to drive this thing?”

“No,” I said, untying the knot keeping us anchored to the post and grabbing the wheel as the boat was taken by the current.

Cleo got the engine started within a matter of seconds, and suddenly the boat was speeding forward with me at the helm, my hands trembling as I held onto the steering wheel for dear life, one hand fixed on the throttle.

We raced under the railway bridge that separated Old Town from the city of Mirage, and I looked over my shoulder at the flames reaching for the clouds over the village, the sky flashing a bright, electric blue as lightning cracked over our heads. –

“What now?” I whispered, looking down at Cleo, who was holding Myla in her arms and had one comforting hand on Troy’s thigh. “What now?”

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 251

Chapter 31: Two Worlds Collide

Troy

I woke with a start, the pain in my arm radiating up through my shoulder and my chest. I blinked against the sun as it beat down on the boat, tall grasses surrounding us as the boat bobbed gently in a small eddy, hidden from view of the main river.

Maeve was sitting with her knees to her chest, her forehead resting on her knees as she slept. Her hair was loose and falling over her, shielding her face.

Myla was limp in Cleo’s arms, her breath coming in short, pained gasps.

I got to my knees, using my good arm to grip the side of the skiff and stand just enough to peer over the top of the grasses, looking out over a wide, swampy area of the river.

How much time had passed? It was full daylight now.

This wasn't right. None of this looked right.

When I had shifted and ran from the port to the castle the night before, I had followed the river. I hadn't seen an area like this at all. I remember coming to a fork in the river, where a tributary flowed into the main river that ran through the city.

She must have taken it, and now we were very, very far from the port rocking in the skiff in broad daylight.

Sitting ducks.

I cursed under my breath as I shuffled toward the steering wheel, then back to the engine that hung off the back of the boat that powered the small propeller. I opened the gas cap, hoping to see the clear liquid shimmering in the sunlight, but there was none. The engine was completely dry and no longer running.

I had the strangest feeling I was being watched as I screwed the gas cap back on. The women were still asleep; they must have been so exhausted that none of them could stay awake to steer the drifting skiff. Somehow, we hadn't run aground on the riverbank.

There wasn't a bird or creature in the marsh with us; no, it was completely silent. The hair on my arms rose as I crouched again, slowly, holding my breath as the sound of another boat's engine cut through the silence.

The boat came to a stop just ahead of us, turning and maneuvering through the grasses. I stood, clenching my good hand into a fist and swallowing against the lump of fear in my throat. If these were Poldesse's men, I couldn't protect these women. I would kill Maeve myself before I'd let them take her.

"Damn, Troy! You look like shit!" Robbie laughed heartily as he came into view, bumping against our skiff with the nose of his boat. I let out the breath I had been holding.

Maeve jumped to her feet, blinking sleep from her eyes. She lunged forward, half asleep, her fist outstretched as though she was going to throw herself on Robbie to defend us.

I caught her by the waist and pulled her back in our skiff, the action sending a fresh wave of intense pain rippling through my arm and shoulder.

I turned to Robbie, nodding at my arm. “I’ve seen better days, man. It’s really good to see you.” In reality I could have thrown my arms around him and kissed him on the mouth. I’d never been more glad to see anyone. “What the hell are you doing here, though? I was going to try to meet up with the crew at the port-”

Robbie shook his head, cutting his engine. “Cap sent me up this way. This river leads out to the eastern end of Valoria. The Persephone is waiting for us there. Cap sent a boat to the port earlier this morning, and they were turned around. The port’s shut down, Troy. Blocked.”

“Poldesse?”

Robbie nodded. It was not the answer I was hoping for.

I had underestimated Damian. I was not the only spy in the castle. Neither was Horace. The castle had been torn to pieces before Damian’s fleet could even make landfall, which meant he had had people on the inside, probably servants, and people lingering in the village and Mirage to light the match that would envelop the entire region in chaos before his ships could come to finish the job.

If I’d had an extra hour, I thought bitterly, I would have been able to get Ernest and Gemma to safety. I wouldn’t have had to make the decision I did. Gemma would still be alive, and there might have been a chance that Maeve would forgive me.

Not anymore.

I looked up, a commotion breaking me out of my contemplation. Robbie was holding Maeve off with one hand as he wrapped a rope around the steering wheel of our skiff, tethering the two crafts together. Maeve was swinging at him, her lips pulled back in a snarl.

“This the one you mentioned in your note?” Robbie chuckled, raising an eyebrow and tilting his head toward Maeve. Maeve was tall and strong in her own right, but compared to Robbie, she looked almost childlike. Robbie was a massive man, towering several inches over me even, and he had broad shoulders and a heavy set build that made him look like a giant compared to most men. He pushed against Maeve’s chest with a single finger and sent her toppling backward into our skiff.

I smiled, shrugged, then nodded toward Myla and Cleo. Cleo was awake, eyes wide as she stared at Robbie.

“We’re taking them all. Myla here is hurt,”

“You are, too, by the looks of it,” said Robbie.

“My arm is broken, but I’ll survive.”

“Excuse me,” Maeve cut in as she struggled to her feet, slipping on the wet floor of the skiff. “Who the hell are you?”

“Robbie, at your service, Princess. Third Captain of the Persephone, ma’am.” Robbie bowed dramatically, tipping his straw hat. Maeve scoffed, turning to me.

“I got us out of there, Troy. But I’m not going with this man.”

“Out of there? We’re out of fuel. What are we going to do, sit here and wait for Poldesse’s warriors to find us? Get in the other boat, Maeve.”

Cleo was already standing, allowing Robbie to lift Myla and gently carry her into the other skiff. Maeve gaped at Cleo, her eyes wide with frustration and betrayal. “Cleo!”

“Troy’s right, Maeve.”

“When I tell you what happened before I found you two last night you’ll beg to differ-Maeve began.

Robbie clutched Maeve by the back of her neck, holding her off the ground by the collar of her dress as though she were a puppy, and tossed her unceremoniously into the other skiff. I snorted as her head popped up again, her face twisted in fury.

“Come on, Troy. Up you get-“Robbie helped me into the skiff and untied us from the dead skiff. Before Maeve could utter another word of protest, we were gliding at a high speed back down river, the smoke from Mirage funneling in the far distance behind us.

Maeve

I used the cut on my arm again to deliver some of my blood to Myla’s lips.

Cleo was patting Myla gently on the stomach, trying to wake her. Myla's head lolled back onto Cleo's shoulders, her eye's fluttering. I could see the blood stains on Cleo's shirt as Myla's head slumped down onto her chest. I looked Cleo in the eyes, seeing the concern flashing across Cleo's delicate features as I lifted Myla's hair and gazed upon the oozing head wound near the base of her skull.

"How?" I asked, fear choking me. My blood was strong enough to heal superficial wounds, but nothing like this. Not until I fully came into my powers.

"We were knocked down in the street. We had just come out of the house, barely making it out before the roof started to cave in. She... she was barely able to stand. I was trying to carry her when two wolves ran by. I tripped. Her head hit the curb."

I bit my lip as I eased Myla's thick hair back over her shoulders. "I don't think I can help her,"

Cleo took my hand, squeezing gently. "It's alright, love. You've already helped her. I don't even want to think about what would have happened to us if we didn't find you."

"That's the thing, Cleo. I can't promise you that we're going to stay safe. I don't. I don't know these men." Then I told her everything, my throat tightening around Gemma's name as I recounted her death. Cleo held tightly to my hands as I spoke, my voice a choked whisper against the thrumming of the skiff's engine.

Troy looked over his shoulder at us a few times, his eyes full of emotion. I hated him, and he knew it. I would never speak to him again if I could help it.

"We can escape, Cleo. I think I have a plan-"

"No, child," she said gravely, adjusting Myla's weight on her lap. "I think we should stay the course."

"What? Why? I just told you he-"

"He saved your life, it sounds like. They can get us out of Valoria. I have family in Breles. We can ask to be taken there."

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“No, Cleo. I’m not certain these men are trustworthy.” I stole a glance at Troy. He was sitting against the side of the boat, talking inaudibly to Robbie over the sounds of the engine and the water rushing past us.

“How can it be worse than what we just experienced? We are safe for now, that’s what’s important. We’re all tired, injured, and hungry. Set your anger aside, and let them assist.”

“I won’t,” I said as I crossed my arms over my chest, sinking lower against the side of the boat. Cleo rolled her eyes but gave me a soft smile nonetheless.

“Your bullheadedness will get you into trouble, Maeve.”

“Alright, everybody hold on!” Robbie said as the boat was suddenly swept sideways by an abrupt change in the current, the water throwing us in a full circle and bouncing us violently for what felt like several minutes. Troy stood as the current slowed again, shielding his face from the sun with his hand as he peered toward the horizon.

I stood as well, sucking in my breath as I looked out over the water. We were no longer on the river. The narrow passage had given way to a wide estuary, the deep blue salt water mingling with the green murk of the river as our boat pushed forward into the strong, white capped

surf of the sea.

In the distance I could see a large boat, a vessel that towered over the cruisers and fishing boats I was accustomed to seeing back home in Winter Forest. Six sails billowed in the wind, pushing the massive vessel toward us, its glossy wooden body reflecting gold in the sun.

“I’ve never been happier to see her,” Troy said, his voice far away and dreamy as he spoke.

“What is that?” I said, not meaning to talk aloud.

Robbie turned his head, beaming, his soft blue eyes dancing with excitement. “That, Princess, is the Persephone.”

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 252

Chapter 32: Persnickety on the Persephone Maeve I stood near the railing of the ship, looking down at the boat that was bobbing on the water

several stories below as Cleo gripped the ladder and slowly made her way up the side of the ship, her eyes fixed on my face. Robbie was behind her, his voice carrying in the breeze as he encouraged her to keep climbing. I grabbed her shoulders and helped her over the railing as she came within my reach. She was shaking, swallowing hard as her feet finally met the deck. "That was terrifying," she said, her voice trembling as she placed a hand over her heart. I took her in my arms, squeezing gently before looking over her shoulder at Robbie as he came over the railing and landed with a sharp thud on the deck beside us. A blond man was standing with his arms crossed over his chest, watching us. Watching me. I turned my head to look back at him, curiosity bubbling through my system. He was one of those people that was truly beautiful. He looked as though he had been cut from marble by a skilled artist who crafted each chiseled feature with great care. He was deeply tanned, his eyes a vibrant hazel that were light enough to be almost golden in the fading sunlight. This must be Cap,' I thought, steeling my expression as I gave him a once-over. He was much younger than I thought he'd be, probably no older than Troy. And to own a boat like this? He must be absolutely loaded. Must be nice to steal for a living. "Pull er up, boys." Robbie said to the crew, stepping back as two men began to pull a crank that was slowly lifting the small boat out of the water. It knocked into the side of the Persephone as it climbed higher and higher with Troy and Myla still inside. The blond man stepped forward, the sunset casting a vivid red glow behind him as he gripped the railing and looked down. I moved Cleo away from the railing as more crewmen stepped toward it, preparing to catch the small boat and lower it onto the deck. A wiry, elderly man stepped forward, pulling on the sleeve of Robbie's shirt, whispering something inaudible as the boat continued its ascent. "Aye, yeah. Troy as a broken arm and the woman has a head wound. Neither could climb the ladder," Robbie replied, his voice booming despite his attempt at a hushed whisper. Cleo paled, looking down at her feet. "She's going to be fine," I coaxed, wrapping my arm around her shoulder. "Cap!" Robbie bellowed, and the blond turned his head, confirming his identity. "Doc want's em' sent to the infirmary right away." "Of course," the blond said, nodding in the direction of the elderly man, who nodded back and walked across the deck toward a set of large, wooden doors. "See?" I whispered to Cleo. "They have a doctor on board. An infirmary, too." Cleo exhaled deeply, a little of the tension leaving her shoulders as the crewmen crowded the railing in front of us, their arms outstretched as Troy stood up in the small boat, holding Myla up to the crewmen with his good arm. "What the hell did you get yourself into, Troy?" said the captain as Troy climbed over the railing, accepting the help of the crew. "I have a lot to explain, Keaton," Troy replied, but the captain wasn't listening. Keaton was staring at Myla as she was laid

out on a stretcher, his golden eyes fixed on her face and his hands trembling slightly as he began to reach down to touch her on the shoulder. Cleo stiffened beside me, and I stepped forward to tell the man to get back, but Cleo's hand shot out and grabbed my arm. "Leave him be," she said quickly, a strange expression lining her face. She was fiercely protective of Myla. Something about her behavior now made a chill run up my spine. I looked back at the captain, Keaton, and watched as his expression began to twist with concern as Myla was carried away and through the double doors. "What was that all about?" I said, not meaning to say it so loudly. Keaton turned his head towards me, slowly, fixing me with a steely glare. "Ah," he said, his voice lifted in a mocking, unfriendly lilt. "This must be Princess Maeve, the very reason Mirage is burning to the ground right now, hm?"

0.00% 13:32 Chapter 32: Persnickety on the Persephone

I gaped at him, taken aback by the comment. "How dare you speak to me in such a way." I scoffed. He took two long, quick strides and suddenly we were nose to nose, his golden eyes boring down into mine. "Let's get one thing straight," he snapped. "I do not care that you're a princess. You're a passenger on my ship. A fugitive, in fact, of Alpha Damian. I'm risking the lives of my crew by having you aboard." "I'll leave then-" "Oh, will you? Be my guest. Watch out for the sharks on your swim back to the shore," he hissed. I blanched, blinking and clearing my throat as I righted myself, tilting my chin upward in a show of defiance. "You will address me as Captain. You will heed my orders. And if you ever hinder the safety of my crew or even so much as speak out of turn I will," he paused, looking over his shoulder at Troy. "Do I have your permission to toss her overboard?" Troy shrugged; a sideways smile plastered on his face. "You're the captain." "I will have you tossed from this ship. Do you understand?" Keaton continued, his brow arched as he waited for my reply. "It's a yes or no question, darlin'." He leaned in, the tip of his nose touching mine. I swallowed, fighting the urge to take a step away from him but wanting to stand my ground. "Yes," I murmured. "Whatever." Keaton nodded tightly, reaching up to dust a lock of my hair off my shoulder before giving me a dramatic smile and turning away, pointing at Cleo. "Are you the girl's mother?" he asked, obviously talking about Myla. Keaton signaled for Cleo to follow him and she nodded as he marched toward the set of doors leading down to the lower levels of the ship. He turned suddenly on his heel, Cleo nearly running into his chest as he skidded to a stop in front of her. He motioned to Robbie, who was leaning on the rail next to Troy, "Troy, meet me at the helm in fifteen minutes. We need to talk. And "show the princess to her quarters." Keaton and Cleo disappeared below deck, the doors closing firmly behind him. Robbie kicked off the railing, sauntering over to me. I stiffened, squaring my shoulders. Troy noticed this and shook his head, exhaling deeply as he ran his fingers through

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the tiny drawers that ran down the length of one side of the desk. More pencils. Paper. A few worn-out books and several dozen thin scrolls that I unfurled one by one. Maps, of course. I felt a pang of regret suddenly, remembering the night I had crept into his room at the castle after the storm when my own room was in ruin. He had given me a book to use as a hard surface to write a letter on, a book of maps. A book he had loved. It was likely gone now. He hadn't brought anything with him. He hadn't had time, trying to save my life and all. "Don't think about it, Maeve," I said aloud, tucking the scrolls back in one of the drawers and continuing my exploration. The surface of the desk was dusty, unused for some time. There was an unfinished sketch of what looked like the beginnings of a beach, a little crab creeping up a rock as a spray of water burst over the rock from behind. Another pang of guilt gripped me, making me think of the library, of his sketchbook. All of those beautiful pictures were gone. Get a hold of yourself," I said, tapping my fingers on the desk and picking up a sea shell that was sitting on its surface, turning it over in my hand before putting it down. All I had learned from my total invasion of his privacy were the things I already knew. He liked to draw. He liked books. He liked maps. A simple man, really. I had been hoping to come across something I could use against him, maybe a box of trophies from his liaisons with women or a dead body hidden amongst his socks and underwear. But there was nothing. He was just Troy. The same Troy I once knew as Aaron. I stood from the desk, looking around at the mess I had made. I was overcome with fatigue suddenly and sat on the edge of the bed. Robbie had laid out a new outfit for me, a pair of trousers and loose top. They were men's clothes, likely borrowed from one of the smaller crewmen. I pulled my soiled dress over my head and changed, unsure of how the loose top was supposed to fit. I tucked it into the snugly fitted trousers and climbed into the bed, curling myself around the pile of Troy's things. *Stay mad at him, Maeve. For Gemma," I said to myself as I began to drift into sleep. The pillow smelled like him, and I was overwhelmed by a sense of longing and unspeakable loss, And it was all my fault, they were after me. I let the tears fall 70.77% 13:32 Maeve I stood near the railing of the ship, looking down at the boat that was bobbing on the water several stories below as Cleo gripped the ladder and slowly made her way up the side of the ship, her eyes fixed on my face. Robbie was behind her, his voice carrying in the breeze as he encouraged her to keep climbing. I grabbed her shoulders and helped her over the railing as she came within my reach. She was shaking, swallowing hard as her feet finally met the deck. "That was terrifying," she said, her voice trembling as she placed a hand over her heart. I took her in my arms, squeezing gently before looking over her shoulder at Robbie as he came over the railing and landed with a sharp thud on the deck beside us. A blond man was standing with his

arms crossed over his chest, watching us. Watching me. I turned my head to look back at him, curiosity bubbling through my system. He was one of those people that was truly beautiful. He looked as though he had been cut from marble by a skilled artist who crafted each chiseled feature with great care. He was deeply tanned, his eyes a vibrant hazel that were light enough to be almost golden in the fading sunlight. This must be Cap,' I thought, steeling my expression as I gave him a once-over. He was much younger than I thought he'd be, probably no older than Troy. And to own a boat like this? He must be absolutely loaded. Must be nice to steal for a living. "Pull er up, boys." Robbie said to the crew, stepping back as two men began to pull a crank that was slowly lifting the small boat out of the water. It knocked into the side of the Persephone as it climbed higher and higher with Troy and Myla still inside. The blond man stepped forward, the sunset casting a vivid red glow behind him as he gripped the railing and looked down. I moved Cleo away from the railing as more crewmen stepped toward it, preparing to catch the small boat and lower it onto the deck. A wiry, elderly man stepped forward, pulling on the sleeve of Robbie's shirt, whispering something inaudible as the boat continued its ascent. "Aye, yeah. Troy as a broken arm and the woman has a head wound. Neither could climb the ladder," Robbie replied, his voice booming despite his attempt at a hushed whisper. Cleo paled, looking down at her feet. "She's going to be fine," I coaxed, wrapping my arm around her shoulder. "Cap!" Robbie bellowed, and the blond turned his head, confirming his identity. "Doc want's em' sent to the infirmary right away." "Of course," the blond said, nodding in the direction of the elderly man, who nodded back and walked across the deck toward a set of large, wooden doors. "See?" I whispered to Cleo. "They have a doctor on board. An infirmary, too." Cleo exhaled deeply, a little of the tension leaving her shoulders as the crewmen crowded the railing in front of us, their arms outstretched as Troy stood up in the small boat, holding Myla up to the crewmen with his good arm. "What the hell did you get yourself into, Troy?" said the captain as Troy climbed over the railing, accepting the help of the crew. "I have a lot to explain, Keaton," Troy replied, but the captain wasn't listening. Keaton was staring at Myla as she was laid out on a stretcher, his golden eyes fixed on her face and his hands trembling slightly as he began to reach down to touch her on the shoulder. Cleo stiffened beside me, and I stepped forward to tell the man to get back, but Cleo's hand shot out and grabbed my arm. "Leave him be," she said quickly, a strange expression lining her face. She was fiercely protective of Myla. Something about her behavior now made a chill run up my spine. I looked back at the captain, Keaton, and watched as his expression began to twist with concern as Myla was carried away and through the double doors. "What was that all about?" I said, not meaning to say it so loudly. Keaton

turned his head towards me, slowly, fixing me with a steely glare. "Ah," he said, his voice lifted in a mocking, unfriendly lilt. "This must be Princess Maeve, the very reason Mirage is burning to the ground right now, hm?"

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Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 253

Chapter 33: Loss of Privileges

Maeve

It was full dark when I woke up, the room still and empty. Moonlight was drifting in through three circular windows on the wall above my head, long beams of pale light casting shadows across the room.

I rose and stretched; the superficial wounds on my skin were gone, and any soreness from the fall had been mended.

What now?

I didn't know my way to the infirmary, but I wasn't technically a prisoner. I decided to wander for a bit and try to find Cleo, maybe even something to eat

The ship was massive and easy to get lost in. The hallways were narrow, no wider than the average man's shoulders in some spots. It was dimly lit too, but I noticed electric lights along the ceiling that were not in use. I wondered why they were using sails to move the ship instead of engines. The boat was silent, ghostlike, as it moved in the waves.

After an hour of exploration, I finally found the infirmary. It was situated toward the bottom of the ship, not quite the lowest level but close enough to feel chilly and claustrophobic. There were no windows down here, not a single one. I placed my hand on the wall as I made my way toward the entrance of the infirmary, knowing that on the other side of the wall was the sea.

The infirmary was just a room, a small one, lit by a single lantern. There was a small nook in one corner, separated by a curtain. I could hear the doctor snoring as I came into the light, smiling and nodding at Cleo, who had looked up from the book resting on her lap.

"How is she?" I asked, sitting down in a narrow, uncomfortable chair next to her.

"Fine, I think. The doctor thinks it was a concussion, a bad one, probably. But he stitched her up, and she seems to be comfortable, at least. We won't really know until she wakes up. My midwifery skills only go so far."

"I'm sorry, Cleo. I tried—"

Cleo took my hands in hers, brushing her knuckles against my fingers. "Don't fret, Maeve. This wasn't your fault."

"But it was my fault, wasn't it? If what Troy said about Alpha Damian is true?"

"No, darling. Please don't think that way. All of this was out of your control."

I sighed, leaning back against the chair and resting my head against the wall. We sat in silence for a long while, Cleo eventually falling asleep sitting upright in her chair. I watched Myla breathe, her chest rising and falling in a smooth rhythm.

I thought about opening up my skin again and giving her my blood, but stopped myself. What good had it done before? Troy was an absolute mess before Cleo had been able to align his broken bones and pop his shoulder back in place. I had just been able to ease his pain temporarily, I think

I stood, closing the door of the infirmary behind me as I walked into the narrow, chilly hallway, feeling along the walls until I reached the stairwell. I walked up, and up, and up until I reached the floor where my room was, Troy's room, but I stopped before turning the corner to go back. Up the stairs was the entrance to the main deck, and I felt the urge to push open the doors and breathe in the air.

But I didn't want to run into Troy, especially if he was alone. I didn't trust myself around him. I wanted him as much as I had before I found out who he really was. But I also loathed him, fiercely, and I knew if given the opportunity I would toss him over the railing of the ship into the water below and like it.

But I didn't have the strength to do that right now. I hadn't eaten in over a day. I had slept for a few hours at the most. I was sick to my stomach with grief, with fear.

I wanted my parents. I wanted to go home.

"You thought you had it rough before, huh?" I whispered, thinking back on my time in the castle. Suddenly, a thought struck me, piercing through me so intensely that I nearly toppled over. I held onto the wall, bending over by the waist with one hand pressed against my stomach

Oh, Goddess. I could very likely be pregnant!

That was the entire reason I was in Valoria. I was supposed to give the Drogomor pack an heir. I was supposed to be Luna, at least until that child was grown and ready to rule.

And now, what would I have? Not the heir to Drogomor, but Troy's child. How could he do this to me?

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Chapter 33: Loss of Privileges

And what about Ernest and Gemma? How long had they known about Troy's real identity? I felt angry, my hands clenching as I leaned against the wall for support.

But then I envisioned Ernest with Gemma clutched to his chest, walking out into the field of grass. His dream of losing his mate had come to fruition. My anger at them didn't matter. Gemma was dead. Ernest was likely dead as well. They were gone.

"Are you alright, miss?"

I turned my head to the voice, seeing a young man standing in the hallway near the stairwell, a lantern in one hand and bundle of something in the other.

"Yes, 1-"

A little seasick?

I nodded, although it was a lie.

"You'll get your sea legs soon enough. Happens to the best of us!" He tilted his head toward the stairwell. "The galley's just downstairs. I – can show you, get you some crackers or something,"

"Yes, please," I said hurriedly, my stomach tightening at the mention of food.

"Great, come with me," he said as I followed him down the stairs. He turned his face to me, smiling. "I'm Pete, by the way. Young Pete."

"Why Young Pete and not just Pete?"

"Because there's an Old Pete on the ship already, but he doesn't like being called that. He goes by Peter, actually. But it doesn't matter. You can call me whatever you want."

"Okay. Pete," I said with a little laugh. He smiled up at me as I descended the stairs, then motioned for me to follow him through a darkened archway that opened up to a large room with wooden tables and chairs in neat rows, illuminated by the light of his lamp.

"I'm not supposed to be in here, honestly," he breathed as we crossed the room and entered the kitchen. "I lost my privileges, you could say."

“Privileges?”

“I got hungry one night,” he began, opening a tall cabinet and pulling a box of crackers from the top shelf. “Came down and made myself a little treat. I found some salt pork in the pantry and ate it, and it was delicious. In my defense I didn’t know it was the last of it, and we had nearly three weeks until we made port again. Oh, man. Troy looked like he wanted to toss me from the ship when he found out.”

“Hmm...” i tapped my finger on the counter as he rummaged, wondering if I should start asking him the burning questions I had about Troy.

“Do you want some beer?”

“No, I can’t-” I said quickly, but stopped myself before I said anything I didn’t mean to say aloud.

He shrugged. “Better drink some water, at least. Here,” He handed me a large glass jug, the amber glass reflecting in the lamplight. “Take it up to your room with you. We all have one.”

“What is it?” I asked, holding the heavy jug up to the light.

*A growler, they’re called. It’s just water, unless you want something stronger. We don’t have much time in the galley during the day. You’ll find these all over the decks, though. Justuh, tie a ribbon on the handle or something, that way you know which one is yours.”

“Okay.” I said quietly, setting the growler on the counter as he continued to rifle through the pantry. He handed me a basket of snacks: dried fruit, crackers, and a few pieces of jerky.

“You shouldn’t eat too much right away, it’ll make the sea sickness worse. Just a few bites at a time, Okay?”

I nodded, resisting the urge to smile at him. I could eat an entire roast with all the fixings right now, by myself. A few crackers and a dried apricot weren’t nearly enough. But Pete seemed like a kind man. I was thankful for not only the food but the company.

“Do you know where we’re headed?” I asked as he closed the cabinets.

He shrugged. "Open water, that's all I know. Have to wait for this all to blow over-"

"We don't have a destination?" Panic rose in my throat, but I swallowed it down, trying to maintain my composure.

Pete eyed me curiously, then shrugged again, leaning against the counter. "Do you have somewhere you need to be in a hurry, miss?"

"Home, ideally."

"Where is home for you?"

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Chapter 33: Loss of Privileges

*Winter- "I paused, pursing my lips. Maybe I shouldn't say anything..."

"Winter Forest? No way!" Pete looked about five years younger as he said it, his eyes lighting up. "Northern lady then, huh? I heard the women outnumber the men up north. Is that true?"

"I-I don't actually know

"

"I've always wanted to go. Always. Ma said, well, she said I need to find a mate down south, close to home. But there's a lot of competition

"I don't think that's how mates work-"

"And I said, Ma, the isles are small and"

"You're from the Isles? Another lump formed in my throat, fear tightening my chest.

"Yeah, I am," he said, biting into a piece of dried fruit. "From a little island near Papeno. It's called Drifter's Rock."

*Are you part of Poldesse?"

He nearly choked on his fruit, shaking his head. "Oh, no!"

"Then what pack do you belong to?" My voice was harsher than I meant it to be, and the young man looked slightly taken aback.

"No pack, miss."

"No pack? You're a rogue, then?"

"No, not exactly."

"I don't understand?"

"If that's you in my kitchen Petey, I'll tan your hide and throw you to the sharks!" came a booming voice from behind a door on the other side of the kitchen.

Pete's face flushed, then he motioned toward the door back to the dining room, taking two long strides and holding it open for me.

I told you I lost my privileges," he whispered and winked, walking briskly ahead of me while we headed back to the stairwell, our stolen goodies clutched in our hands.

"I left my growler-"

"No bother, you can get it at breakfast. Olly is a mean old man between the hours of eight in the evening and six in the morning. I wouldn't go back, if I were you."

"Olly?"

"The cook. The king of the kitchen. King of the ship, in my opinion. Captain Keaton doesn't mess with him, either."

"Oh, noted," I said shortly as I reached the stairs. Pete stood at the railing, shifting his weight nervously. "Are you coming up?"

"No, I bunk with the rest of the crew down here. You go to bed, miss. I'm sure you'll feel better in the morning."

He walked down the hallway, his lantern disappearing from view and leaving me shrouded in total darkness as I made my way back to my room.

What the hell had I gotten myself into?

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 254

Chapter 34: Kneading and Needing

Maeve

“If you wake up earlier, you’ll have a better shot of getting a real breakfast, miss.” Robbie was sitting on a crate, a thick canvas sail laid over his waist as he sewed a patch into it, the needle nearly as long as his hand.

I looked down at my bowl of cold sludge, which was the only way I could describe such a thing. It was oats, probably, with a hint of fly. I picked the fly out of the bowl with my finger, wiping it on the crate I was perched on and looked around, taking it all in as though for the first time

“Why does the Persephone use sails and not engines? I know this ship has power. I saw the electric lights.”

“No one can see us if the ship’s powered down.”

“What do you mean? A ship like this? It stands out, trust me.” I stirred my oatmeal, trying to find the confidence to take a bite.

“Captain Keaton is a traditionalist, you could say.” Robbie breathed, wincing as he pricked his finger with the needle.

“You mean a pirate”

“Aye, a pirate. He is. He can’t have other ships picking up on our location while were runnin’ goods, so we turn the engines off and power down when we don’t want to be picked up on radar, you see? That’s why he chose a Galleon ship when he went into this trade. Cruisers don t have sails.”

“How did he find this thing? Did he build it?”

“A story for another time, miss. Eat.”

I scowled down at my bowl. I was starving, but I couldn’t bring myself to eat it.

“How do you shift, on the boat?” I asked, saying whatever was coming to mind to cut through the boredom.

“That’s easy. We just turn into dolphins,” Robbie said, his face totally serious and focused on his work.

I opened my mouth, shocked, but then heard a snort from above our heads, where Troy was at the helm, his hands wrapped around the great wooden steering wheel with a crooked smile on his face.

“Whatever.” I said under my breath, stirring my cold oatmeal again.

“You should eat, Maeve.” Troy said, looking down at me. “I’m sorry.” I said to Robbie. “Do you hear someone talking?”

Robbie’s eyes went wide, and he puffed out his cheeks, shaking his head as he looked back down at his work. “What did you get yourself into, Troy?”

“Nothin’ I can’t handle,” Troy laughed, looking down at the compass in his hand before turning the wheel a fraction of an inch.

“Where is the real captain today? I’d like a private audience with him.”

“He’s likely in the infirmary, with Myla,” Troy said down to us, arching his eyebrow in my direction. He was trying to get a rise out of me.

“Stop talking to me,” I bit out, setting my untouched oatmeal down on the crate and turning my back on Troy, my eyes focused on Robbie.

Robbie scratched his beard, looking up at Troy for help. “Don’t leave me with this one-”

“Well, she won’t talk to me. She needs someone else to harass. Looks like that’s you, pal,” Troy said.

I knew he was smiling, I could feel it. Damn him.

“It’s kind of the captain to look in on my friend” I began, giving Robbie a fake smile.

“He likely has other motives,” Troy interrupted.

spun around, glaring up at him. "I said STOP talking to me," I snapped, turning back around and fixing Robbie with a glare, sizing him up.

He swallowed, squaring his shoulders.

"She wants a fight, Robbie," Troy said with mirth.

Chapter 34: Kneading and Needing

Robbie looked around, uncomfortable, his shoulders tensing as I narrowed my eyes at him. "When can I expect to see the captain?"

"He's right there, miss,"

"NOT Troy. I need to see Keaton."

"Well, I can't say for sure"

"I want to know where we're going. I need to get word to my family somehow so they know I'm alright."

"We're heading into open waters, Maeve," Troy said, completely ignoring the fact that I didn't want him to speak to me for the rest of our lives.

I ignored him, staring Robbie down.

"We're, uh, heading into open waters," he said nervously, looking back up at Troy.

I stood, stalking over to where Robbie was sitting, frustration and pent-up energy coursing through my veins. I was going to get something out of someone. Someone had to know what the plan was.

"Careful Rob, she bites," Troy laughed.

Abruptly I turned on my heel to look up at him as Robbie let out an audible sigh of relief. "Stop-"

"Leave Robbie alone, Maeve. I'm the one you're mad at."

"I have nothing to say to you."

"You keep talking, though?" Troy gave me a smirk, shrugging his shoulders.

That was it. I was about to lose it. I had no qualms of handing his ass to him in front of his entire crew.

I marched up the stairs, my hands clenched into fists so tight that my nails were digging into the palms of my hands. Robbie called for me, his voice shaky as he did so. Other crew members stopped what they were doing to watch as I walked up to Troy, fury flaming behind my eyes.

Oh, how I wanted to scream, to hit something. The past day and a half had been a living nightmare. I was sick over it, of the loss of the terror and the grief. I blamed Troy for all of it. I was out for blood.

And Troy was enjoying it. He was watching me spin out of control and taking pleasure in it. I pulled my arm back, thrusting it forward with every intention of socking him cleanly in the jaw when someone grabbed my arm, their fingers tightening around my flexed muscles.

“Not here,” Keaton said, his voice low.

Troy steeled his expression, nodding toward the lower deck. “She’s idle. She needs a job, Keat.”

“I can see that,” Keaton turned me around, looking me up and down before leaning to speak into my ear. “What did I say would happen to you if you risked the safety of my crew?”

*I didn’t-”

“I don’t tolerate fighting on my ship.”

“He deserves,” I began.

“Your utmost respect, darlin’. You don’t realize the position he’s in now, do you?” Keaton asked.

I sneered, pushing Keaton away, but he only tightened his grasp on my arm, squeezing until I flinched from the pain.

Troy wavered, taking a step forward as though to break us apart, but then he stilled, watching Keaton with a careful eye.

Keaton straightened up, looking around until he spotted Robbie on the deck below. “Take her to Olly.”

“Olly?” I squeaked, remembering my conversation with Pete the night before. I swallowed, shaking my head. “No, I won’t.”

“Then you can apologize to Troy for being a right pain in the ass, Princess,” Keaton said as he leaned toward me again, his eyes wide and serious

i bit my lower lip pushing past him and darting down the stairs toward Robbie, who looked up at Troy with another helpless expression.

Troy only nodded, looking grave as I pushed through the doors leading to the lower levels of the ship, fighting back tears of anger, fear, and frustration

Who were these people?

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Chapter 34: Kneading and Needing

Olly was a portly man, short and stocky with a mass of gray hair that he wore in a tight bun at the nape of his neck. He was dressed in a shirt and trousers much like my own, but wore a surprisingly clean apron for how busy the kitchen looked as peered around.

“Ever cooked before?” he asked, his eyes narrowed as he looked me up and down.

I nodded, looking at the wide table in the center of the kitchen that was covered in pots and bags of grains and beans. “I can make eggs. um. I baked a cake with my mom once-”

Olly shook his head, reaching into a cabinet and pulling out a fresh apron, tossing it in my direction. I grabbed it, unrolling it and tying it behind my back. “Put your hair up, too. And wash your hands.”

I nodded, tying up my hair in a bun on the top of my head and walking toward the sink, but I found the faucet was dry.

“No power right now, kid, you have to use the pump.”

I looked around, seeing a water pump and a second sink, this one much larger than the first, on the other side of the room.

When I had finished washing and drying my hands I made my way back over to the center table, watching Olly with interest as he chopped several large carrots with quick precision. Four large, plucked chickens were sitting in pans on one side of the table, waiting to be dressed. My stomach rumbled loudly and painfully at the sight.

Olly looked up, his eyebrow arched. "Didn't eat breakfast?"

"I-I slept late. There was only oatmeal left."

"Well, that'll need to change if you're going to be working in the kitchen. I need you here at six every morning, on the dot. Breakfast starts at seven, and then we clean up and lay out dried goods for lunch. Then we start on supper." He pushed a bowl covered in a towel in my direction. I peeped instead, seeing a large, bubbling mound of dough. "Knead it will ya? Dust the table with flour before you do; otherwise, it'll stick."

I looked at him helplessly for a moment as he dumped the carrots into the pans of chicken, rolling his eyes as he went to the water pump and washed his hands.

"Like this," he said, sprinkling flour on the table and dumping the dough out onto the surface. He began to push against it, folding and turning it as he repeated the motion. I nodded in understanding, taking over as he went back to work on the carrots and potatoes.

"You gotta eat kid. What do you think happens on a boat full of wolves if people start going hungry?" He was chopping potatoes as he spoke, his eyes on his task. "Hunger exacerbates the pent-up energy they're already experiencing by not being allowed to shift on board. That's why you're here, you know. You need an outlet. You're my bread maker now, kid."

Kneading dough did feel nice. After kneading three large batches my shoulders were burning with effort, and the anger and frustration that had been causing my body to tighten had lessened, the tension working its way out as I shaped the dough and plopped it in bread pans.

Olly began to stoke the wood-powered oven as I cleaned up, wiping the debris off the table and scrubbing it with a soapy rag. I looked over my shoulder at the shiny electric stove and oven in the corner next to a refrigerator, which had been propped open. He noticed me looking at it, shaking his head slightly as he closed the wood oven's heavy iron door.

“There’s a cooler downstairs, at the bottom of the ship. Keeps the fresh produce cold in lieu of the fridge. And we have fresh dairy, chickens, and eggs from the goats and poultry downstairs as well.”

“Goats?” I asked, unable to hide my excitement. The castle had had a few goats. They were menaces, constantly breaking out of their pens and ravaging the kitchen garden.

“Yeah, my wife Meran tends to them. You’ll see her at supper when she brings up the milk. I’ll teach you how to make cheese and yogurt tomorrow.”

Another few hours passed in light conversation centered around Olly’s expectations for the kitchen. I washed dishes and laid out plates and utensils in the dining room in preparation for dinner.

The sun was setting by the time Olly brought the bread and chicken out of the ovens, and the two of us carried the food out to the dining room as the crew was beginning to trickle in, grabbing their plates and serving themselves as the room filled with laughter and loud conversation.

I saw Cleo as I grabbed my own plate. I went to her, hugging her gently before sitting down next to her and eating like my life depended on it. When I finally looked up from my meal and glanced around, I saw Troy sitting with a group of men, a pint of beer in his hands as he spoke, his eyes alight with joy and laughter.

I’d never seen him smile like that. It made my heart tighten to see it. He was home.

He looked at me, his mouth open in a smile that hadn’t been meant for me, but it was there, nonetheless. After a long moment, he winked, then slowly turned his gaze back to his companions.

I had the sudden desire to have him in bed with me tonight. Damn it all.

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 255

Chapter 35: No Time to Write Wrongs

Maeve

I went back to my room. Troy's room, after dinner to find it spotless. The mess I had made was righted, and I noticed as I opened the drawers in the bedside tables that he had placed everything back inside, including the wadded-up papers and random rocks. I smiled to myself as I shut the drawers, looking around before thinking better of going to bed right away, and decided to visit the infirmary instead.

Cleo wasn't there, but I found Myla still sprawled out in the bed in the center of the room, her eyes shut and mouth slightly open as she lingered in a deep, ceaseless sleep. I touched her face, then her hair, murmuring a silent prayer over her as she slumbered.

"She'll wake up from it," said Keaton.

I nearly jumped out of my skin, turning to find him leaning against the doorway with his arms crossed over his chest. "You scared me," I said, blood hammering in my ears.

"Sorry, I didn't think anyone would be down here. Cleo's found a friend in Meran, I'm afraid. Both talkers, those two."

"I didn't realize you were on a first-name basis with Cleo-"

"Well, she's my mate's mother. I suppose that allows for some kind of intimacy."

The blood drained from my face as I looked up at him, then back down at Myla. "What did you just say?"

"My mate," he said matter-of-factly, taking a single step into the room and looking down at Myla.

"No, she-"

"*Why don't we step outside for a minute, Maeve? I think the two of us have some things to talk about." He turned on his heel and walked out of the infirmary with me close behind him, my mind reeling at his revelation.

Myla's mate? Him? A pirate?

I suddenly remembered the strange look on his face when Myla was brought aboard the ship, how he had gone to her immediately, struggling to maintain his composure as she laid limp in the stretcher.

Crazier things have happened, I thought dismally, thinking of how shocked I had been when I found out Gemma and Ernest were mates.

Oh, Gemma. I wished she was here. She would be thrilled for Myla. And she would definitely have scolded me for being anything but happy for her.

I buried my grief, following Keaton up the many staircases until we reached the main deck.

“You’re too hard on him, you know.” Keaton was leaning on the rail, looking out over the water. His shirt was billowing in the soft breeze as the waves beat against the sides of the boat, the sails overhead pulling us further into the open water.

“He must have explained what he did to me,” I said shortly, leaning on the rail in a similar fashion, my hair still knotted in a bun on the top of my head. I was thankful for it; I didn’t like the wind whipping my hair into a tangled frenzy.

“He did. You have to realize, though, that he was expecting to find you there in Drogomor.”

“Wasn’t that the whole point? Pretending to be my breeder to gain access to the castle?”

Keaton looked at me for a long moment, then looked away, sighing. “He said you wouldn’t understand.”

“Well, I’m not understanding you.” I tapped my fingernails on the railing, growing impatient. I had already tried to ask about his mate bond with Myla, but he had quickly changed the subject, the pain of her injury and state of being etched into his face. I didn’t push the subject, even though I wanted to

“I’ve known Troy for a very long time, Maeve. If he had known what was going to happen, he wouldn’t have set foot on Valoria, you have my word.”

“Your word means nothing to me.”

“You’re a real peach. I can see why Troy likes you.” Keaton smirked, his eyes a deep greenish-gold in the twilight sky.

“He doesn’t. He doesn’t know me, not anymore. That Maeve died in Drogomor.”

13:46

Chapter

No Time to Write Wrongs

“Well, that’s rather ominous.” He pushed against the railing, facing me.

It’s true. And I didn’t know Troy at all, really. He lied to me. I only knew him as Aaron”

“Troy is totally incapable of being anything other than himself, I assure you.” He chuckled then shaking his head. I looked up at him,

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What do you mean?”

“The man you knew as Aaron was one-hundred percent Troy. I’ve met Aaron, the little prick. He’s worthless. Had he been the one with you in Valeria, well, you’d have been the one trying to get Aaron out of Valoria, not the other way around.”

I couldn’t help but smile at that. The real Aaron had been kind of a wuss when we met as children. Perhaps Keaton was right and I would’ve been trying to run the real Aaron out of town if he’d been my breeder instead of Troy.

“How long have you known Troy?”

Keaton looked at me for a moment, deciding whether or not he wanted to tell me anything of substance about his friend. He shrugged, pursing his lips.

“Troy joined our band when he was six.”

Your band?”

*Ave, well, by band I mean just a group of orphans who ran amok on Avondale. Beach Rats, we were called. They’re everywhere in the Isles. No

pack to claim them, no homes to go back to. Troy didn't say a word to any of us for an entire year after we picked him up. He just followed us around, sleeping down the beach from us until Robbie convinced me to take him in. We were all around the same age."

"I can't imagine," i said quietly, totally shocked and suddenly heartbroken for Troy. I remembered the portrait of the woman in his journal, the woman whose face was blurred like it had come from a distant, fragmented memory. Does he remember his parents?"

"You could ask him, but he'll probably tell you what he told me. He doesn't remember his mother, he thinks she may have died around the time he was born. His father, or at least the man he called dad, left him on Avondale when he was four or five, and just left, I guess. His dad was very sick, from what Troy remembers of him. He's still not sure if it was his real father or just someone tasked with caring for him since his mother was dead."

"Oh, my Goddess, that's awful." i felt sick to my stomach at how I had been treating Troy all of the sudden. Left alone so young? To fend for himself?

Keaton waved his hand in dismissal. "He doesn't like to talk about it. Don't tell him I told you."

I won't, I promise."

"Good. Anyway, Troy was a beautiful kid, and I mean really beautiful, with those weird eyes of his and his thick hair. We used him as bait, with permission of course, to lure old ladies away from their purses at those fancy beach-front restaurants under the guise of not being able to find his mommy, and all that. We made a killing in those early years, got ourselves a small cruiser by the time we were ten or so."

*And I'm guessing that's when the piracy began?" Something about this felt vaguely familiar.

"Not quite, but it did get us off Avondale. More opportunities elsewhere, if you know what I mean."

I don't follow —

*Poldesse was broken up in those days, you know. You were probably born around that time, what are you, twenty? Well, the islands of Papeno and

Suntra were the new ports of trade during the Reconstruction, and we ran goods for merchants on our cruiser for years. One of those runs was how we found the Persephone. She was beached on an island south of Suntra, rotting in the sun for Goddess knows how long. We worked like dogs until we had enough coin to have her towed to Suntra and renovated, top to bottom." He patted the railing lovingly, smiling as though the ship were alive.

gaped at him, trying to wrap my head around the idea of three little boys growing up alone for so long, accomplishing so much on their own

"Troy was our navigator, always. He was the reason why we kept the sails. Loves maps, that guy. He wanted nothing more than to stand at the helm with that damn compass in his hands. Robbie is our strongman, although he wouldn't hurt a fly. He just looks scary

"What are you then?" I asked, trying not to laugh as he gazed at me, surprised

*The pretty face, obviously"

He smiled "In reality, Troy and Robbie are too good. Every band of pirates needs a bad guy"

"So that's why you're the captain, then?"

"Someone's gotta do it

Chapter 35: No Time to Write Wrongs

We stood in silence for a moment, looking out over the water.

"Why didn't you guys join a pack when you were young?" I asked, tucking a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

"We made a vow not to; we were our pack in a way. We didn't need anyone else."

"How did you end up working for Damian, then?"

.

Keaton sucked in his breath, looking very serious. I could tell he didn't particularly want to talk about it, but he seemed to know that I was likely to press the issue if he didn't tell me now. "Damian rebuilt Poldesse, you know.

There was a lot of money in it already. Romero's money. You may not know about him, but well, he was the reason Troy went to Valoria in the first place.

"He mentioned him-"

"Did he mention Romero was his grandfather?"

I blinked, looking up at Keaton in surprise. "No, he didn't."

"Well, now ya know. Damian used that to his gain. He took advantage of Troy. We didn't catch it until it was too late."

"What happens now?" i said abruptly.

He looked over at me, searching my face. "You need to talk to Troy about that, Princess," he said shortly.

"But you're the captain. Where are we going? I need to get word back to my parents,"

"You are the most wanted person in the land, Princess. Taking you back to your parents would be a death sentence for everyone involved, including them."

"I could just send a letter-"

Keaton leaned in, desperately serious. "No, Maeve. Right now, you're dead. You and Troy died in Drogomor, okay?"

I leaned away from him, my throat tightening so violently I found it hard to breathe. I knew for a fact that once word spread about what happened in Valoria, my dad would come after me. He would do everything in his power to find me. If he wasn't careful, he might be led into a trap, and I would be long gone, sitting on a boat heading to lands unknown.

"No!" i exclaimed, shoving him and pointing my finger in his face. "I WILL be sending a letter. I have to. My family will try to find me, and I won't allow them to think I am dead."

"it's too late. We are drifting at full sail, Maeve. We'll be far from even the ports in the isles by tomorrow. I'm sorry."

I gaped at him, tears beginning to well in the corners of my eyes as he looked down at me.

"Trust that we will keep you safe," he continued, and I glared, shaking my head and turning away.

"I was a pawn

*You were the reason, Maeve. There's a difference-"

I walked away, my heart heavy in my chest. This was too much.

As I walked across the main deck toward the door, something caught my eyes, the moon reflecting off of something in the crow's nest on the mainsail above my head. I looked up, barely able to make out Troy's profile as he sat with his legs dangling from the crow's nest one hand gripping a book while the other sketched, his head bent, oblivious to my presence.

*Troy?" I said, hoping my voice would carry up to him.

He looked down, his hair falling around his face.

"Can we talk?"

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 256

Chapter 36: Everything in This Room is Mine

Troy

"I thought you never wanted to talk to me again, ever," I said as I closed the door to my room behind me, leaning against it.

Maeve had followed me all the way back after calling up to me in the crow's nest. Reluctantly, I'd come down to see what she wanted.

It was a relief to be here, on the Persephone, standing in my room. It would have been even better if the woman on my bed was willing, maybe even naked, not giving me the look Maeve had in her eyes.

"I changed my mind, for now."

"I see," I said as I crossed the room, pulling the chair from the desk and sitting in it backward, my legs on either side of it, and my chin resting on its back. "I'm sleeping in here tonight, just so you know."

"No, you're not." Maeve said with conviction, jutting her chin.

"Well, it's my room. Always has been. You can sleep here, with me, or go bunk with the boys three stories down."

She glared, crossing her legs. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, wearing one of Young Pete's poet shirts. It was way too large, but the look suited her somehow, especially in a pair of Young Pete's trousers that fit very well.

I cleared my throat, waiting for her to begin. I knew that it was supposed to be a serious conversation, but I was in a light mood. I was happy to be home.

And even though she hated me, I was happy Maeve was here with me, too.

"Why does Damian want me?" she asked point-blank.

I shook my head, unsure of how or where to begin. I reached into the pocket of my shirt and pulled out the map Romero had given me, the only thing I had managed to bring with me from the castle, and held it out to her.

"Toss it to me," she said.

"It's fragile, come get it."

Her eyes narrowed into slits as she stood, walking gingerly toward me. I could've given it to her, of course, but I enjoyed the view of her body in the tight pants she was wearing too much to let the opportunity pass me by.

We had all given Pete shit for it, of course. He was a gangly young man, and Maeve filled out those trousers better than he ever would

"What is it?" she asked, looking down at the ragged, coarse paper as she sat back down.

"It's what Damian was after. You were only a piece of the puzzle."

"What do I have to do with. I don't know what this says?"

“It’s in another language... an ancient language. It’s a map to Lycaon’s Tomb.”

“Lycaon? From the legend?”

I nodded, watching her face as she looked over the map, her brow arched as she tried to make sense of it.

“He was supposedly the Moon Goddess’s son, right?” she continued.

“Yeah, that’s the guy.”

“But that is a fairy tale? A myth?”

“I thought so too, but this map... it’s authentic. At least, it looks to be. Whoever made it, well, they made it a long time ago. I think I could get us there-” I said.

“Why? You just said this is what Damian is after. Wouldn’t he be looking for the ”

“He doesn’t know where the tomb is. He wanted the map. Romero had it, for some reason. That’s why Damian needed Romero, at least. paused, unsure of how to tell her about our last night in the castle. “Horace attacked him. Something must have changed between Romero and Damian”

“Horace did what?” she was shocked, her mouth hanging open.

12.07

Chapter 36: Everything in This Room is Mine

“Horace,” I breathed, “was one of Damian’s spies.” And then I told her everything, how Ernest and Gemma came with me to see him. How Romero died right in front of us.

“I wasn’t sent to Valoria to find the map. I was sent to get Romero out of the tower. That’s what I was told. It was simple; I’d free him and be on my way, getting him safely back to the isles, and we would receive a huge sum of money for it. But I was deceived, Maeve, tricked into believing that was all. I agreed because well, Damian knew my parents. At least he said he did. He said Romero was my grandfather and that he-look, I just needed to see him.”

“Keaton told me. She paused, looking guilty

“Told you the whole story, huh? Yeah, I knew he would.”

“I promised him I wouldn’t tell you what he told me,” she said.

“Well, I promise I won’t tell him you told me; how about that?”

She nodded, once, a brief smile touching her lips. I felt a little sick at the sight; it was the first time I’d seen her smile since we’d left the castle.

“Romero said something about you being the key, Maeve. Do you have any idea what he meant?”

She shook her head, her brow knitted in a frown. “I don’t.”

“Well, we’re stuck then. That’s all I know.” I lied, deciding not to tell her about Romero’s desire for Maeve to produce an heir for my line that he would raise and use for its powers. He was dead, after all.

“Keaton said we were heading south for the Southern Pass,” she said, her voice wavering. “He said I can’t that I can’t even write home.”

“Do you understand why?” I asked, hoping she could see the sense in the decision.

“It would put us at risk-”

“it would put your family at risk, most of all. It’s unlikely Damian will try anything; he won’t invade Winter Forest. Your mother is too powerful.”

“I’m not worried about my mom, Troy. I’m worried about my dad.”

**Your dad?”

“He’ll go to Valoria to try and find me. I’m worried about what will happen when he gets there. He won’t stop looking for me, and he’ll put himself in danger doing so. He’s still strong and clever, but he’s not the man he was twenty years ago. Age changes people. I just... I understand why I can’t write. Keaton said it’s better if everyone thinks I’m dead. And maybe he’s right but.”

“You’re going to see them again,” I stood, crossing the room as I sensed her beginning to crumble. She didn’t move away when I sat down next to her,

taking the map from her hands and laying it beside her on the bed. "I promise you,"

"How can I trust you after everything that has happened, Troy?"

"I'm trying to fix this Maeve, I promise. Right now, my only concern is keeping you out of Damian's hands. The Persephone sticks out; it's known in the port cities. We have to get far away and hope this blows over

"My parents will start a war over this, you know."

*That's what Damian wants, I think. There's nothing we can do about it."

We sat in silence for a moment, shoulder to shoulder.

"Did you really lock Gemma in the utility closet?" she asked, sniffing.

"Well, I was in there with her. She was pissed."

"I'm sure she was," she said, her voice cracking with emotion as she laughed and cried at the same time.

"Did you know that Myla and Keaton are mates?" I asked, looking over at her.

"Yeah, Keaton told me. Myla hasn't woken up yet, though. She doesn't know. That's all she ever talked about. There was nothing else she wanted more than to find her mate."

"What are the odds, huh? That they'd find each other like this?"

*The same odds as Gemma and Ernest," she said, sadness cracking in her voice. She looked down at her lap, tears falling down her cheeks. "His vision came true. He lost his mate."

"I know. That's why I told you we couldn't go looking for him. He... Ernest was my friend, Maeve. I really liked the guy. He trusted me like I'm asking you to trust me now."

12-07

Chapter 36: Everything in This Room is Mine

"I need time, Troy."

“I know.”

“Are you really going to sleep in here?” she asked, wiping her eyes.

“Would that be okay?” I wanted to say it was MY bedroom, so, of course, I was going to sleep in it, but I kept my mouth shut.

She shrugged, climbing over the bed to turn the sheets down. She took the elastic band out of her hair, letting it fall and loose over her shoulders. Then she reached down, unbuttoning her trousers before stopping, her cheeks blushing deeply. “Will you look away?”

“Oh,” I said, not even realizing I was staring so intently. I stood, crossing the room with my back to her, and pulling a large quilt from one of the drawers in the built-in. I stood there, holding the quilt in my hands until I heard her slide into the bed and pull the covers up, shielding her body from my view.

It wasn't like I hadn't seen her completely naked before. I saw her in my dreams. I was obsessed, honestly.

I turned around, walking across the room and laying the quilt on the floor on the other side of the bed, taking my pillow from the bed and dropping it onto the quilt.

“What are you doing?” she asked as I started removing my clothes.

“Look away.” I said, teasing her.

She blushed a little deeper, but her eyes didn't leave mine. Hmm, bold choice. It was a little unfair that she was watching me now after telling me to turn around, a direction I had followed.

“Are you going to sleep on the floor?”

“Uh, yeah. I am.”

“Why?”

“Why? You don't want me in... Well, it's my bed but, nevertheless. I'm sleeping on the floor.”

I stepped out of my pants, staring at her for a second. I was nearly naked, and her eyes were still on me. Maybe I did still have a chance here.

When she didn't say anything else, I laid down on the floor, wrapping the quilt around me. She shifted on the mattress a few times, quieting eventually and long enough for me to start to drift into sleep.

*Troy?"

I opened my eyes to see her staring down at me, her head practically hanging over the side of the bed.

"Yes, Maeve?"

"Were you really an orphan?"

"I was."

"Did you really spend your whole childhood unattended, being a pirate?"

"We wanted to be pirates, Maeve. Every little boy wants to grow up to be a pirate." I yawned hugely, blinking up at her.

Maeve struck me as someone who had rarely ever been alone as a child. She always had someone there to comfort her, to encourage her. She was seeking comfort from me, even after I totally upended her life. She was livid, rightfully so, but it didn't stop her from reaching down and taking my hand as she laid her head back on the pillow, her fingers gripping mine as she fell asleep.

I had told her I loved her. I had meant it. I still did.

And I prayed like I prayed every night since I first saw her that she would soon realize what I had known for a while.

She was my mate.

And I'd do anything to protect her.

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 257

Chapter 37: Awake

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Myla

Vanilla, but not the essence Mom used when she baked those chocolate chip cookies I liked. It was sharp, fresh, like the long strings of vanilla beans sometimes sold in the market. I sniffed. There was something else with it, floral, like the heavy scent of the magnolia trees when they were full of mature blooms that had been soaked with rain.

I blinked into the yellow light, sniffing deeply again, then went rigid as I realized what was happening.

I felt electric, my chest tightening with sudden anticipation. This was it. This is what I had been waiting for; it had to be! My mate was near. Very near

But where the hell was I? My head ached painfully, the skin on the back of my neck tight as I tried to move my head to the side, my vision blurred. I was not at home. The floor beneath the bed where I laid was pitching back and forth in slow, rolling motion. But that smell was dominating all of my senses at once.

Where was he? Nearby, for certain.

I reached up to rub sleep from my eyes, groaning softly as my arms ached and tingled from lack of use. Blinking into the light again, I saw a wiry old man, his face drawn in deep concern and heavily lined with age..

“Oh,” I said quietly, only slightly disappointed. I would love him regardless, right? He was my mate, after all. Everyone said the Moon Goddess worked in mysterious ways.

“Cleo, she’s awake! Look!” A deep, honeyed male voice rang out in the stuffy room. I turned my head, seeing my mom step forward with a wide, grateful smile stretched across her face and tears rolling down her lashes.

“Mom?”

“I’m here, sweetheart. Oh, thank you, Goddess!”

“What-”

Suddenly, my vision was filled with gold. I blinked again, surprised, pushing my head back against the pillow to get a better angle of whatever, whoever, was blocking my field of sight.

“Nice to finally meet you, darlin’,” he said, his golden-green eyes sparkling with pleasure. His golden hair was falling around his face, which was deeply tanned, and his wide mouth was stretched into a beautiful smile, showcasing his straight, white teeth. He was gorgeous, the most delicious thing I had ever seen. And he smelled good, like really REALLY good.

Then he touched me, his fingers gently running down the length of my forearm. Electricity. Fire. Pure, unaltered desire.

Oh, take that Natasha Blaine, I thought with mirth. She had found her mate at the last social while I had gone home empty-handed and desperately hungover. Natasha’s mate was balding and had smelled strongly of ale and onions when she showed him off during the market, stopping at my booth to gloat.

But mine?

“Holy

shit...” I breathed, looking up at him.

“Myla!” Mom hissed, her voice twisted in shock and embarrassment. But I only had eyes for the beautiful man hovering over me, his eyes alight with something I could only describe as joy.

Take that, Natasha! I thought, my mind going over how I was going to tell her, how I was going to flaunt my perfect, divinely beautiful match.

But then reality came crashing down around me, the pitch of the room and the dull ache on the back of my head suddenly became too much. I felt a little sick, wondering why all of these people were in my room.

My gaze lingered on the golden man for a second longer before I broke away, turning to the side to see the wiry old man, whose own eyes had narrowed as he tilted his head, looking over my expression.

“Alright, we need to give her some space now-” he said, but his voice was drowned out by the scream that erupted from my throat as frantically began to look around at the small, windowless room.

“Where-where-”

“Myla, honey, it’s alright. You’re okay!” Mom was clutching my hands together, stopping me from flailing as I turned my head from side to side. The golden man had my legs and was holding me down against the bed, his face etched with concern.

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“Don’t give her that!” he snapped, his teeth bared as the old man appeared at my side with a syringe, the needle gleaming the light of a single oil lantern swinging over our heads. The old man backed away; his brow knitted in frustration.

“Myla, listen to me- Mom began, her eyes round and full of tears, “you’ve been asleep for a few days honey. You’re safe. Do you remember anything?”

“Remember-remember what?”

“Keaton, honey, can you go get Maeve? Please?” Mom let my hands fall and sat on the side of the bed, reaching out to take my cheek in her hand.

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“Aye, I will. Don’t give her any meds. Not unless I’m here,” Keaton stole a steely glance at the old man before turning away and sprinting out of the room, the door swinging as the room rolled from side to side.

“I’m going to be sick!” I cried as I sat up straight, my vision blurring as Mom held my face between her hands.

“Breathe, sweetheart. That’s it. In through your nose.”

It smelled like salt. The room was clammy and cold. Hooked around, watching as the old man stood in the corner, taking apart the syringe on a small counter.

“Where are we? The room’s moving,”

“We’re on a boat, Myla. But it’s okay,”

“My head hurts really bad!”

“I know it does. I know. What do you remember? What is your last memory?”

I closed my eyes, swallowing against the bile threatening to rise in my throat. What did I remember?

Heat. I remembered heat. I woke up and kicked the covers down with my feet and then I couldn't breathe.

“The house?” I asked, looking up at Mom as she stroked my hair away from my face. “There was a fire. I was in bed... -I don't remember leaving, but you were there and telling me we had to get out.”

“Yes, you're right. That's exactly what happened”

“Then we were on the street and...”

“Myla! Oh, thank the Goddess!” Maeve burst into the room, leaping forward and throwing her arms around me in a tight squeeze. She took the breath out of me, literally, and I wheezed as she inadvertently tightened her grip as Keaton tried to pull her off of my body.

“Get ahold of yourself, Princess!” Keaton snapped, his face reddened with effort. He was breathing heavily and ran his fingers through his hair as he glared at Maeve. He looked down at me, his face softening. “Lots of stairs,” he panted, winking at me.

“Ugh!” Maeve groaned as she watched the exchange, shaking her head at me. “Seriously, Myla? You feel it, don't you?”

I nodded briskly, not taking my eyes off of Keaton. Oh, yeah, I felt it.

Mom gave Maeve a look, but not the playful look I was expecting. There was a severe hurt behind her eyes, something I had never seen before. “What's wrong?” I asked, looking from Mom to Maeve. Keaton sat on the edge of the bed, glancing at Maeve expectantly.

Someone else was lingering in the doorway, his figure shadowed by the crowd. He was watching us, shifting uncomfortably until he caught Keaton's eye.

It was not in the room now with so many people. I felt queasy again as I watched them all look at each other, willing one another to be the one to speak

“Why are we on a boat?” I finally asked, settling my gaze on Maeve. She was on the edge of tears, and the man behind her moved out of the doorway suddenly, resting his hand on her shoulder. She shook it off.

“We’re going somewhere safe, Myla,” Mom said, her voice quivering.

“That doesn’t answer my question-”

“Gemma’s dead,” Maeve said, her voice silencing the room. I felt the floor drop from beneath me.

“What?” I choked, a nervous laugh tickling the back of my throat. “When? How-”

The dark-haired man stepped forward, and I instantly recognized him as the man I found with Maeve in the market weeks ago, the one who had left without barely a word. The man with the strange eyes. Aaron, of Red Lakes.

What were we doing on a boat with Maeve’s breeder? And Gemma was dead? None of it made any sense.

“My name is Troy,” he said, standing next to Keaton.

Then he told me everything.

And I sat there, listening, totally incapable of being able to process what had happened. Aaron hadn’t actually been Aaron of Red Lakes at all. His name was Troy. He was someone named Romero’s grandson. Gemma was dead, and it was likely Alpha Ernest was as well. Drogomor had fallen to Alpha Damian of Poldesse, a pack I hadn’t even known existed. Damian wanted Maeve for something. He would be coming after us. We were running.

I looked over at Maeve, taking her appearance in for the first time. She had her hair piled on the top of her head, and she was wearing a loose linen top, the sleeves too long and rolled up to her elbows. She was also wearing an apron that was dusted with flour and other grime.

The princess was here no more, I realized, reaching back to touch the wound on the back of my head, my fingers gingerly stroking the thick sutures.

The world was upside down.

How long had I been asleep?

Everyone started talking at once, and suddenly, the room felt hot and claustrophobic. I grimaced uncontrollably, closing my eyes against the yellow light of the lantern swinging above my head.

I felt Keaton's touch on my leg, squeezing gently, reassuring me that everything was okay.

"That's enough! She needs to rest!" the doctor said sternly, silencing the room. I kept my eyes closed and listened to the sound of bodies shifting uncomfortably in the small space. Maeve leaned down and kissed my forehead, smelling like bread yeast and other cooking ingredients.

Mom took my hand and squeezed it, and then I heard the sound of footsteps as everyone began to leave. I opened my eyes to Keaton, a

sober smile on his lips.

"I think you'll be more comfortable resting in our quarters," he said casually, glancing over at the doctor.

"Our quarters?"

"Well, yes. You're the lady of the ship, darlin'," he waved his hand in a short circle. "It's all yours. Every inch".

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Keaton pulled the curtains open, revealing a vivid fuchsia colored sunset sparkling across the water. I stood next to him, staring out over the horizon in awe. "It's beautiful," I whispered, unable to take my eyes off the endless water.

But in truth, his quarters were more beautiful than the vibrant sunset. It was colorful and loud, with busy floral wallpaper and trim painted gold. A four-poster bed was the centerpiece of the room, with a heavy red velvet canopy and gold tassels dangling and swaying gently as the boat rocked in the

waves. Art lined the walls, and he had several large potted plants tucked along the windows and in the corners of the room.

I looked around, running the tips of my finger along the edge of a large couch dressed in the same red velvet as the curtains on the windows and the bed's canopy, marveling at the riches.

"You're certainly not a minimalist," I said, a shy smile touching my lips. He grinned, shaking his head.

"Aye, well, I live in a world of blue, you see. I would never see other colors if I didn't make use of them elsewhere." He leaned against the windowsill, watching as I explored the room. It wasn't a large room by any means, just a bed and a couch and cabinets built into the far wall. The bedroom was inaccessible to the rest of the ship, the only entry point being a climb up a narrow spiral staircase that led up to his office, which had access to the upper deck.

"How did you get the bed down here?" I asked, sitting down on the couch and stroking the velvet. I was nervous, excited, and definitely still a little bit tired and wobbly. He noticed this, taking a pillow off of the bed and crossing the room in three quick strides, tucking it behind my head.

"It was placed in the room before we finished constructing the boat, actually."

"Makes sense." I yawned, laying back against the pillow. I felt oddly comfortable around this perfect stranger. I knew nothing about him, but somehow, I felt like I had known him all my life.

"It's the mate bond," he said, sitting on the other end of the couch. He lifted my feet and draped them over his lap, gently stroking my ankles.

"Did you just read my mind?" I smiled, closing my eyes to his touch.

"No," he laughed. I opened my eyes to see his hair falling loose around his face as he looked down, running his fingers across my skin. "But I can see it in your eyes. You're nervous, but at home with me. I feel it too."

"What are the odds? That's all I can think about."

"Aye, well, I guess having the princess on board was good for something."

“She’s being a terror, I’m guessing?” My voice seemed far away, my eyelids heavy with fatigue. It’s amazing how being knocked-out for four days can be so completely exhausting.

“That’s why she’s been put to work in the kitchen,” I could hear the smirk in his voice, “Troy’s idea, actually. I was surprised, but then I saw her trying to square up to Robbie-”

“Maeve will square up to anyone if the opportunity presents itself,” I said, opening one eye. “She can’t help it.”

“I know. I watched her trying to ruffle Robbie’s feathers for sport.”

I closed my eyes again, thinking of Robbie, the gentle giant. Then my mind wandered back to Troy’s rapidly explained account of what had happened in Mirage and the castle, the thought bringing down my mood significantly. “So, what now?” I asked soberly, anticipating the same answer I had been given only an hour before. We hide in open waters, we wait out Alpha Damian’s invasion, we hide, we wait, we hide...

“Well, Troy has a map, you see...”

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Chapter 38: A Real Gem

Troy

Her hair was tumbling over the side of the bed as I rose onto my knees, climbing from the bed I had made myself on the floor for a second night. She was sideways on the mattress, her head closest to me, with one arm dangling over the side of the bed as she slept.

And, for the second night in a row, I had held her hand in mine as we fell asleep.

During the day, she barely gave me a passing glance, her demeanor somewhat cold and standoffish. But at night, when it was just the two of us well. I would take what I could get.

I walked slowly across the floorboards, wincing as I opened the door and it creaked loudly, the sound seeming to echo in the small room. She always

slept like the dead, thankfully, and I closed the door behind me as I slipped into the darkened hallway.

Keaton was waiting for me at the helm as I walked out onto the main deck, looking up into the clear, star-laced sky as the sails hung heavy in the gentle breeze. I walked up the stairs, turning my head to the horizon where the sun was just rising into view, casting an ominous red glare across the still water.

“Red sun in morning, sailors take warning,” Keaton quipped, his hands resting on the helm.

I nodded shortly, a chill touching the back of my neck as I looked back over the water once more. Not a single cloud in the sky, not one white capped wave. Stillness. Calm.

“How long do we have before the storm hits?” I asked, reaching his side and pulling the map from the inner pocket of my jacket.

He shrugged, arching his brow, “If only someone would let us use the radar system-”

“Damian will spot us the second we power up the ship, Keaton. You’ve seen his cruisers. You know the kind of tech they have on board.”

* Aye, well, how useful are radars when tracking a ghost?”

The Persephone was truly a ghost lurking in open water. We were invisible. We needed to stay that way, at least until we reached the southern pass.

“We’re still on course. Don’t worry,” Keaton said, smiling as he tossed me my compass. I caught it, opening it, and checking to make sure he was correct.

“We’re not going anywhere in this weather,” I said, tucking the compass in my pocket and motioning up to the sails with the rolled map still in my hand. They were still deflated, and the boat was rocking back and forth in the sea instead of pushing forward towards our destination.

“We can turn the engines on-”

“Not for another day, at least. Not until we’ve traveled out of Damian’s range-”

“Sometimes, I wonder who the captain of this ship is.” Keaton gave me a sideways smile, taking his hands from the helm and crossing his arms over his chest.

“I just read the maps, Keat. Nothing more.”

He walked behind me, clapping me on the shoulder as he headed for the stairs. “Best be getting back before Myla wakes up.”

“How did that go?”

“Our first night, you mean?” Keaton snorted, shaking his head.

“I don’t need the gory details”

He waved his hand in dismissal, standing on the top step, “Put her straight to bed, in a gentlemanly way. No fun was had. Not yet.”

There was a twinkle in his eye that made my heart squeeze with jealousy. He caught it, leaning his back against the railing while giving me a knowing look

*Things not going well with the princess?”

“She hates when you call her that you know,” I said, unrolling the map and spreading it on the table on the other side of the helm.

Keaton shrugged, tapping his foot, “Oh? What should I call her then, if not princess? Kitchen Wench?”

I shook my head, smiling to myself. “She has a temper, Keaton. I wouldn’t tempt her-”

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“Can you imagine what that one will be like when she comes into her powers?” Keaton laughed, shaking his head back and forth. “She’s a formidable creature, Troy. I’d be wary of her, if I were you.”

“Oh?” I said, unable to stop myself from laughing. But Keaton’s expression was suddenly totally serious, his eyes narrowing on mine for a moment before he relaxed, exhaling deeply.

“You told me what you knew about Maeve’s involvement in everything. But I can’t help but wonder if there’s more you’re not telling me.”

“She’s completely ignorant of anything related to Damian, I assure you.” I understood Keaton’s wariness. Alpha Damian was not a man to be crossed. He had been Romero’s Beta at one point, taking over for the old fool before I was born. Keaton and I had been too young, too far removed from the pack of Poldesse and the rest of the pack lands to understand what happened, but we worked for the Alpha enough to be cognoscente of the dangers involved. How many times had we seen his pack members strung up on the docks, their lifeless bodies swinging in the breeze? Or worse, come across a boat somewhere deep in the waters off the coast of the Isles and seen the carnage inside, a glimpse of what he did to his traitors and dissenters.

And now we were in the thick of it, at the very center of Damian’s grand plan. What that grand plan was, exactly...well, I didn’t know for sure.

I caught Keaton’s eye and shrugged, feeling exposed. “I couldn’t leave her behind, Keaton.”

***Because you believe she’s your mate? Or because you feel”

“|- -I aided in this mess. I was bait, Keaton. Damian used me, used all of us,”

“Aye, well, not much we can do about it now.” Keaton tapped his fingers on the railing, watching me closely.

“I know you want to say more,” I said with a touch of bitterness.

“What exactly do you plan to do with the girl, Troy?”

“Get her somewhere safe. Then somehow get word to her parents about her whereabouts without-”

“Aye, it’s too late for that, Troy,” he said, a dire warning in his tone. “Don’t pretend to be ignorant of Alpha Ethan,”

“He’s her father, Keaton.” I ground my teeth, shaking my head before breaking from his gaze and looking down at the map for no reason other than I couldn’t dwell on the subject any longer.

Yes, I knew about Ethan. Alpha Ethan, the king, once the Alpha of Drogomor and the unchallenged ruler of the pack lands, at least by general concession. And then there was her mother, Rosalie. Oh, jeez. Don’t even get me started on that.

“You’re holding her against her will,” Keaton said boldly, pursing his lips, “We already have Damian on our ass. The last thing we need is her parents after us. Her mother, Troy? The White Queen? Come on.”

We had heard the stories as children, of course. Rosalie’s powers were immense and undisputed. She was the force that held our kind together, the right hand to the Moon Goddess herself.

“I’m not risking Maeve’s life by turning this ship around and attempting to pass back through the channel -”

“I’m not asking you to do that,” Keaton’s voice was harsh, serious, his eyes stone cold. “We need to leave her somewhere and run. Soon.”

“Leave her?”

“Drop her in one of the skiffs and take leave through the pass without her.”

“You can’t be serious.” I almost laughed, but Keaton was serious. He was as serious as he could possibly be.

“Everyone is at risk with her aboard, Troy. Don’t think I don’t know why you’re dragging your feet in doing the inevitable. This lust you feel, this responsibility, it’s nonsense-”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,”

“She hasn’t come into her powers yet. She can’t feel the mate bond. You have no ground to believe-”

“She could be pregnant, Keaton. There’s a real chance.” I swallowed hard, looking away from him and gripping the helm for dear life.

Keaton clicked his tongue, shaking his head. “You dumbass.”

“I was doing what-”

“You were never her breeder. Your mission was to get Romero out of his dungeon, or prison, or wherever the hell they were keeping him.”

“But it was more than that. I showed you the map he gave me.”

Keaton waved his hand in dismissal, “A myth, nothing more.”

“I believe it’s more. And I know Damian won’t stop until he finds her. I can’t give her up to him. I can’t let her return to her family and put

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them at risk.” I raised my hand to stop him from interrupting, knowing full well Ethan and Rosalie had already been a part of a war and ended it just fine. “Damian’s after something. He wanted this map enough to have Romero killed for it. Romero said Maeve was the key. whatever that means. He needs whatever is in the tomb, and he needs Maeve for it, I know it. I won’t let him have her. I won’t.”

Keaton was staring at me, his face blank of all expression. He shrugged, sighing deeply as he finally surrendered and continued his journey down the stairs. “I’ll go on your treasure hunt because I wouldn’t be a pirate if I didn’t,” he said dramatically, but the second this gets out of hand, I’m tossing her overboard.”

“She’ll take you with her, I guarantee it.”

“Aye, well, that’ll be the day.”

He walked across the lower deck, whistling casually as though he hadn’t just attempted to rip me to pieces. I bit the inside of my lip, shaking my head. “You can have whatever treasure we find”

“Oh, I know,” he laughed, looking up at me over his shoulder, then he slipped through the doors and out of sight.

Maeve

I spread my fingers over the map, trying to make sense of the seemingly ancient script and hand drawn curves of the unfamiliar lands. It was so different compared to the maps Troy used to navigate the ship, so old-fashioned and almost mythical. I turned it upside down, looking at the tiny pictures along the margins; drawings of wolves and the moon cycles, of course. A strange looking flower and a man with red eyes. The Moon Goddess herself, depicted as a woman with long, flowing white hair covering her naked breasts, her skin sketched in silver.

She had a necklace on, some kind of gem the centerpiece of the jewelry. I held the map closer to my face, trying to make out the details in the dim light of the oil lamp next to the bed. Where had I seen this before? The Moon Goddess was rarely depicted as a woman; she was generally drawn or referenced as a wolf, a great white wolf. And in the rare instances she was depicted in her human form, well, it was all up to interpretation.

But I was stuck on the necklace, some distant, long forgotten memory tickling the back of my mind as I looked at it.

“The temple!” I exclaimed, nearly jumping off the bed. Of course. I had seen it before. Mom used to take me with her to the temple in Winter Forest, a great white building made of granite. It was an ancient place, an eerie place, the very place where all of the White Queens before her had been buried beneath the stone floor.

I never paid attention to Mom’s long, drawn out, and carefully calculated prayers. My mind always wondered, as did my eyes, and I vaguely remembered the faded mural on the ceiling of the temple where the Moon Goddess and her divine descendants were painted in living color

The Moon Goddess had been painted in her human form, white haired with her face obscured. Around her neck was a large, ornate necklace, the centerpiece a large, milky-white stone set in pure silver.

I always thought that was a power move, but if anyone could wear silver without having a near fatal reaction, it was sure to be the Moon Goddess.

The settings design was repeated on the face of the statue behind the altar at the head of the temple. The Moon Goddess statue was even more ornate and beautiful than the painting, and in the center of her neck, a perfect circle, the center blank, empty. I remember touching it once, feeling a kink in the granite that was made a tool of some kind, like someone had messed up on the

carving. But when I touched it I felt emptiness, like something was missing, the space only as big as my thumb filling me with sudden dread.

Something had been there at one point. Something that was now gone, now lost.

I looked over the map again, a fire burning in my blood. The symbol was repeated in the margins several times, and then again towards the center of the map, the circle faded and worn as though someone had repeatedly traced a route to it over and over for dozens, if not hundreds, or years.

The door to the room opened and I looked up, seeing Troy appear. He had been gone since the earliest hours of the morning, returning just as I was waking to make it down to the kitchen for another day of kneading and shaping bread.

“It’s a gem,” I said abruptly before he had even entered the room fully. He looked at me, giving me a quizzical stare.

“What is?”

“What Damian is after. It’s a gem.”

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Chapter 39: An Educated Woman

Troy

She was seated with her legs crossed in the bed, her hair piled in that messy bun she always wore. She had Romero’s map in her hands, pointing to one of the faded pictures on the margin. There was a look of sheer excitement in her eyes, something almost rabid and unrecognizable.

“A gem? I shrugged out of my old leather jacket, tossing it into the corner of the room as I bent to untie the laces of my boots.

“Yes, I’m sure of it.”

I looked up, arching my brow, “What makes you think that?”

*This symbol, it's repeated several times, see? I didn't even notice it before but I've seen it. I've seen it in the Temple of the White Queens in Winter Forest. It's on the statue behind the altar. I used to run my fingers across it."

"What's its significance?"

"I'm not sure. I didn't really ever pay attention when my mom was praying." she frowned, watching me with a careful eye. "Can I ask you something?"

"No."

"Why do you all wear those, well, poofy shirts?"

"This? I looked down, spreading my arms wide so the loose, thick fabric unfurled over my arms.

"Yeah. I mean, they're so—50..."

"Old fashioned?" I laughed, reaching up to untie the strings that held the shirt closed over my chest. "They serve a purpose, actually."

"And what purpose is that? To make sure you look the part while you're playing pirate?"

glared at her, then pulled the shirt over my head, tossing it on the bed. She blushed, blinking like an innocent schoolgirl as she looked away from my bare chest.

"Say you get tangled in the rat tails while climbing up to mend the sails, or thrown overboard," I said, enjoying the progression of the pinkness in her cheeks as I unbuttoned my pants. "Heavy fabric weighs you down in water, and a high neckline can choke you if you're snagged on something at the right angle. You need something you can slip out of easily. I began to pull my pants over my thighs, slowing as I caught her gaze. She swallowed, looking away again and pretending to be invested in the paneling of the wall. "Plus, it's hotter than Hell on the deck. The loose fit allows air to brush against your skin, keeping you cool."

"Oh," she said quietly, not daring to look at me. I loved this game.

*That's why we wear these old-fashioned shirts. Not because we want to look like pirates, but because we already are pirates."

She stopped, biting her lip. Obviously,

She looked at me then, smirking. “My dad would lose his mind if he knew I were sharing a bed with she hadn’t meant to say that out loud.

“We’re not technically sharing a bed, are we? I’ve been sleeping on the floor like a dog.”

“Because you are one,” she said pointedly, her chin lifted towards the ceiling.

“Anyway, about the map?”

She looked me up and down as I sat next to her in the bed, resting my head against the wall and stretching hugely, my inner arm grazing her shoulders.

“Are you going to put clothes on?” she asked, tilting her head towards my underwear, which was all I was wearing.

“Too humid, storms coming. Plus, you’re supposed to be leaving for work soon. I’ll be able to sleep naked in my bed if I want to.”

She rolled her eyes, scooching a few inches away from me and exhaling as she settled her gaze back on the map in her lap. “About the map,” she said, running her fingers along the faded script. “There used to be something in the center of the statue of the altar in Winter Forest. I could feel where it had been, I don’t know, chipped away? There was a catch to the space, where the granite was sharp, and it shouldn’t have been. It was no bigger than the tip of my thumb.”

*And you think whatever is missing from the altar is what Damian is after? I was barely paying attention, my eyes focusing solely on the

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Chapter 39: An Educated Woman

exposed skin of the back of her neck as she leaned forward over the map. I reached out, touching her neck with my fingertips, watching as the fine, white hair rose against her skin. “Maeve,” I said softly, unable to stop myself, “I’m sorry.

She looked over her shoulder, the light catching on her strawberry blonde brows as her glacier blue eyes settled on mine. "I know," she said, her voice trembling slightly. "Are you even paying attention?"

In a split second, I had her on her back, the map drifting in the air for a moment before falling onto the edge of the bed and then sliding to the floor. She was looking up at me, startled, but there was a warmth behind her eyes, something I hadn't seen since I climbed up to her perch in the library

I bent my head, my face hovering just above her own. She was totally, completely still."

"I want you," I breathed, my lips brushing hers as I spoke, "and I don't care if you hate me forever. It doesn't change a thing."

"I don't hate you," she replied, her eyes focused on mine. I had her pinned against the mattress by her wrists, her hands open, palms towards the ceiling. She bent her fingers, the tips of them grazing my own as I held her down.

I kissed her hard, the way I had wanted to for days. She opened her mouth to mine, her teeth biting down on my lower lip.

I reached down along her waist, pulling her shirt up over her stomach, and touched her skin, my hand traveling up to cup her full breast. She sucked in her breath as I squeezed. I let go, rising to my knees over her and gripping her shirt, tearing it open to reveal her breasts.

*Troy!" she squeaked; her mouth slightly ajar in surprise.

"I told you, you can get out of them easily."

She attempted to knee me in the groin, but my weight was holding her down. I bent my head, kissing her on the neck as I ran my fingers up her arms that were still outstretched over her head. Then I kissed her collarbone, then the half-moon scar over her left breast.

Then I took her nipple between my teeth, biting gently as her back arched and she cried out.

"Am I hurting you?"

"No," she said, a little breathless, "No. Don't stop."

Maeve

I was limp. I couldn't have moved, even if I wanted to. Whatever he was doing with his mouth was about to send me over the edge.

His mouth left my breasts long enough for him to straighten up and reach down to roughly pull my pants down over my thighs. His fingers slipped into my underwear, pulling them to the side. I exhaled as he touched me, his thumb pressing against my clit and making me moan with pleasure. Oh, Goddess, how I had wanted this, despite everything. This was bad, so very, very bad.

I arched my hips towards him as his fingers slipped inside of me, pushing me even closer to the edge. I opened my eyes as he sighed, noticing the smug expression on his face.

I nudged him hard with my knee and he nearly fell off the edge of the bed, releasing his hold on me to grip the quilt in order to steady himself.

A look of hunger flashed in his eyes, a challenge. He arched his brow, then grabbed my hips firmly, pulling me towards him.

I yelped in surprise, locking my legs around him but he pushed them far apart, gripping my inner thighs with his hands.

And then he bent down, kissing my stomach, then lower, and lower, until his mouth met the tender, aching place between my legs.

"Oh," I breathed, going limp once more. I reached up and ran my fingers through his hair, tangling it between my fingers as my hips arched to him, desperation pulsating through my core.

"Troy!" I exclaimed, "Where—where did you learn how to do this?"

His head popped up from between my legs after a few moments, a laugh trembling through his chest. He rested his chin on my thigh, shaking his head.

"I'm not going to answer that right now, Maeve."

"Okay." I said quietly, panting as he bit my inner thigh, the sensation sending a ripple of pleasure through my body.

He rose over me again, running his hands over the curve of my hips and then my breasts, squeezing them until I cried out, throwing my head back against the mattress.

“I’m going to be late for work,”

He flipped me over, so I was on top of him, straddling him as he laid against the bed beneath me. I was suddenly self-conscious, feeling

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Chapter 39: An Educated Woman

totally exposed to his gaze. I tried to cover my breasts with my hands, but he grabbed my wrists, shaking his head.

He was hard, ready. I could see the look of anticipation etched into his face. But I sat there, dumbly, unsure of what I was supposed to do next. What had Cleo said to me weeks ago? To tell him what I liked? But he was expecting something from me in this position. I was on top. I was the one in control.

“What do I do now?” I whispered shyly.

“Lift up a bit so I can get my boxers off,”

“Oh, yeah-” I rose on my knees while he awkwardly fumbled between my legs, pulling his boxers down over his knees.

He nudged one of my legs by accident, my knee slipping over the side of the bed, but he caught me before I tumbled over, his hands leaving pink marks on my waist.

“I’m not very good at this!” I said hurriedly, a furious blush creeping over my chest and cheeks. I hated not being good at something. I hated not being the best. But he was the only man I had ever had sex with, and we had only done that twice. Well, the first time hardly counted, in my opinion, so once. And Troy? How many times had he done this? Judging by what he was doing with his mouth a few minutes ago, I’m

guessing enough to know exactly what he was doing.

“You’re great at this!” he laughed, his voice catching in his throat as I straddled him again. I could feel him beneath me, his cock pressing against

the wet folds between my legs. I moved forward involuntarily, seeking my own pleasure without thinking about it. He moaned; his eyes only opened to slits as he looked up at me.

“That’s what you do now, Maeve, but with me inside of you.”

leased onto him, the muscles of my thighs tightening as fullness sent a warm sensation through my core. Okay, that wasn’t so bad. I could do this. Plus, from this angle I could see his face clearly in the light from the lantern. His brow was knitted in a look that rode the edge between pleasure and pain.

“Now what?” I breathed, my heart beginning to race.

“Move your hips,” he said softly, sleepily. I shimmied my hips and he grunted, taking me by the waist, “i’m not going to last long if you keep doing it like that,”

*Up and down then?”

“Kind of-” He guided me with his hands, moving against me with his hips. The motion was exquisite, and I felt myself begin to move without his help, my body reaching for my own climax as he panted beneath me.

The.

He reached up, his hand on my shoulders and his thumbs stroking my neck before he pulled me down, kissing me deeply.

It wasn’t long before our movements became more desperate. I cried out to him, pressing my forehead against his as wave after wave of pleasure crashed over me. My body relaxed, my legs trembling as I tried to maintain my position, but I was struggling.

He flipped me over onto my back, running his hands over my body and gripping me by the waist as he drove into me again, and again, and again until he suddenly pulled himself from me, crying out as he spilled his seed over my belly.

I had barely the energy to be shocked.

He collapsed next to me, the two of us laying against the mattress, panting.

He held his hand up, looking over at me expectantly. I arched my brow, bringing my own hand into the air, and he gave me a high five.

“Good job,” he said hoarsely, his arm falling back against the mattress.

“Did you seriously just give me a high five?”

“Yeah, you earned it.”

I rolled my eyes, elbowing him in the side of the chest before rising, swinging my feet out of bed. “Why did you, um...”

“So I don’t get you pregnant.”

“What-oh, right.” Of course. There was no need for that now, was there? He was no longer my breeder. He was just Troy.

I was okay with that.

He sat up, fumbling in the bed for the torn shirt and handed it to me, smiling shyly. “Sorry,” he said as I wiped the sticky substance away.

“It’s probably for the best,” I said with an anxious laugh, my stomach tight with nerves. Thunder boomed over our heads, and the sound of rain was echoing through the room. I hadn’t noticed it before.

“Is this the storm you were talking about?” I asked, standing and searching under the quilt for my pants and underwear.

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Chapter 39: An Educated Woman

He laid back against the pillow, looking up at the ceiling. I saw a brief flash of worry cross over his features. “It is, but we’re riding the edge of it. It’ll pass by us. Just be careful walking around today; the boat is going to be moving like mad in these waves.”

I could feel the intense pitch already as I pulled on my shoes. It was definitely past six o’clock in the morning. Olly was probably thinking was sleeping in.

I looked down at Troy as I pulled one of his poofy shirts over my head, tucking it into my pants so it didn’t fall down around my thighs. “Thank you for helping me uh-”

“Sex education, babe,” he laughed, closing his eyes, “I’ll be your instructor as long as you want.”

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Chapter 40: Tempest Tossed

Maeve

I cursed under my breath as another pan slid across the kitchen work table, slamming into the floor with an audible thud. I reached for it, thrown off balance as another wave violently rocked the ship.

Olly appeared, a large set of keys in one hand as he steadied himself on the doorframe. “No dinner tonight, Maeve. Throw some water on the fire while I lock up the cabinets.”

I moved to the water pump, gripping the sink as we rocked back and forth. I felt sick to my stomach by the motion but filled a large bucket with water nonetheless. I could hear Olly tossing random items in the cabinets, his keys jangling and scraping against the wood surfaces as he locked each one.

I opened the wood stove, leaning back as I tossed the bucket of water on the embers and closed the air filters, shutting the door to the oven tightly. “Is everything okay?” I asked, not bothering to mask my concerned expression.

“We’re fine, just a bit of rough weather.” His face betrayed his words, however. His brow was furrowed, his mouth pursed in a tight line.

“Have you been in many storms before?” I asked, my anxiety beginning to rise as the boat was tossed violently to the side once more. I hissed, rubbing my hip where I had bumped into the side of the worktable.

“I have, but never this far out in open water. We usually find a port to wait out the storm but-Olly was cut off by a wave crashing into the circular window on the far wall of the kitchen.

“How big are these waves?!” I asked, panicked.

“Pretty damn big,” he said, his face going pale as he spoke. He was gripping the counter, watching the window in alarm. “You’d better head back to your cabin, Maeve. I need to go fetch Meran.”

I nodded, taking off the apron and hanging it on a hook near the doorway to the galley's dining room. It was empty, all the chairs put away in the closets along the walls. The tables had been nailed to the floor, and now I knew why.

I climbed the stairs to the second floor, which housed the staterooms. I could hear the crew on the deck above my head, running along the floorboards as they fought the pitch of the waves.

"Batten down the hatches!" came a voice from above, followed by the sound of thunder. I winced, suddenly remembering the storm that had marked Troy's first night in the castle. It felt like so long ago now. A lifetime ago.

I walked into the room I shared with Troy, the bed still unmade from our rushed and desperate coupling. An odd sensation gripped my chest as I shut the door behind me, sinking against the heavy wood of it as I closed my eyes and let the memory wash over me like the waves hitting the boat. I hoped he would come back again tonight, but that seemed unlikely given the circumstances.

Plus, I had sworn to hate him for all eternity. Having him in my bed would defeat the purpose of that, I supposed.

I changed out of my clothes, standing naked in the room and holding on to the wall for support as the ship continued to rock back and forth. I opened one of the doors along the wall and fished through Troy's things, grabbing one of his shirts and a pair of loose-fitting thermal pants that were meant for much cooler weather, but they were all that would fit around my waist. The shirt smelled like him, and I was instantly comforted, even if I hated myself for admitting it.

"What does one do while riding out a storm on the high seas?" I said to myself, looking around. The bed seemed like the safest place to be. I could be tossed around on the mattress by the waves and not bruise myself like I had in the kitchen, at least.

So, I climbed into the bed, unruffling the quilt and bringing it up to my chest as I laid back against the pillow, my eyes fixated on the ceiling.

I listened to the men above fighting with the storm. Had I heard Troy's voice yelling commands? Was that Pete's voice crying out in reply?

I thought of Myla, tucked up in Keaton's quarters, wondering what she was doing right at this moment. I thought of Cleo, who was probably panicking, in the room right across the hallway from my own.

I should go to her, I thought, but my legs didn't move. I was tired, the boat inadvertently rocking me to sleep.

Eventually, I closed my eyes, letting shallow sleep waft over me, waking two or three times to the sound of thunder. I didn't realize I was clinging to the mattress until the door swung open and bounced off the wall, bouncing several times before the boat pitched in the opposite direction and the door slammed shut again.

I inhaled deeply through my nose, trying to calm myself the way my mom had taught me.

Chapter 40: Tempest Tossed

Count to three, I thought, holding my breath. One. TWO...Threes,

I rolled across the bed as the boat was suddenly thrown to the side, my head cracking against the wall. My ears were ringing, and I had nearly bitten through my lip. I rolled back over, clutching the side of my head and closing my eyes, groaning in pain.

"Get up!" Troy had suddenly appeared, his voice cutting through the sound of the sea hammering against the ship. He threw the quilt from the bed, pulling me into his chest as the room abruptly pitched to the side again, sending anything that wasn't nailed to the floor flying through the air. We slammed into the far wall, Troy's body absorbing the blow and protecting me from crashing into the rows and rows of built-in shelving, the cabinets rattling from the impact.

gasp, clutching his shoulders as the ship pitched violently to the other side, flinging us back onto the mattress.

"We have to get above deck!" he cried, wrapping his arm around my waist and getting me to my feet. The door to the room was open, swinging and slamming into the wall as the boat continued to be rocked by waves. I felt bile rising in my throat as we were thrown sideways once again, Troy clutching me to his chest with one arm while his free hand grasped the doorframe.

I heard yelling on the deck above our heads, the sound cutting through the violent scraping of crates sliding across the deck and slamming into the railing.

“I thought we beat the storm,” I said.

“We were in the eye of it! I was wrong,” A crashing sound from above us drowned out his voice. Screams of terror tore through the air as Troy pulled me into the hallway where water was now rushing down the stairs.

It was raining harder than I had ever seen as I looked up through the open doors into the storm. The sky was blackened, angry, the clouds hanging so low you could reach out and touch them.

Troy pulled me up the stairs, his grip on my arm so tight, I could feel my skin bruising beneath his touch.

“What are we going to do?” I cried; my vision blurred by the heavy sheets of rain pounding the deck as we emerged from the dark stairwell.

But the answer was right in front of me. The skiffs. They were usually tied to the side of the boat, held in place by long cables so they could be hosted up to the railing for easy access.

One had been brought up but suddenly came loose, dropping onto the deck and sliding across the width of the ship right in front of us where it burst through the railing on the opposite side, the crewmen inside clinging helplessly to the small craft as it slid from the deck as the Persephone was hit with another massive wave.

“Oh, Goddess!” | screamed as the crewmen’s faces disappeared into the inky, furious depths of the sea, boat and all. I barely noticed the rope being tied around my waist until Troy tugged on it, hard, and then took me in his arms, cradling me against the doorway to the lower levels as the boat pitched to one side, sending crates flying through the air.

The sails had come apart, shredded by the wind. They flapped incessantly, the sound loud enough to ring in my ears more intensely as Troy began to move us forward through the ankle-deep water on the deck. I tried to wipe the water from my eyes, but it was no use. It was pouring, every inch of air thick with rain.

“KEATON!” Troy called out, gripping the railing as he guided me along the deck. Another skiff was smacking against the side of the ship with each wave. He looked back at me, his eyes shining with a mix of terror and grief.

“Get on the skiff!”

“Not without you!” I dug my fingernails into his arm.

Another wave crashed into the ship, turning the entire vessel in a sharp semi-circle.

“Maeve! GET ON!”

“NO!”

He reached out, cupping my cheek with one hand while gripping the railing with the other. Time seemed to stop. The violent pitch of the Persephone faded into nothing but stillness. I laid my hand over his, leaning into his touch as tears welled in my eyes. “You have to get on

“I won’t, not without you.”

“I have to stay with the ship-”

“Then I’m staying too!”

He pulled me in, kissing me deeply. His tongue slid along my lower lip until I opened my mouth to him, desperate, my chest heaving painfully

No, I thought, this is not goodbye. Not like this.

Chapter 40: Tempest Tossed

He pulled away pressing his forehead against mine as a prayer escaped his lips, the words drowned out by the rain.

Then he picked me up, tossing me over the railing and I landed hard on my bottom in the skiff, water splashing over my legs from the impact. He was bent over the railing, fumbling with the other end of the rope that was tied around my waist as he tried to tie it to the side of the skiff

But then he stilled, his eyes fixed on something behind me.

I turned my head, slowly, as a cold shadow fell over me, followed by a spray of salty water. The Persephone seemed to abruptly sink, and my stomach flipped as though I were falling. I looked up, seeing the crest of the monstrous wave, three times the height of the Persephone's tallest mast, just as the peak of it crashed into the sails, snapping the masts as though they were toothpicks.

I looked at Troy as the masts fell, slicing through the deck and sending a spray of debris into the sky as the wave came down as though in slow motion. His eyes were shining with tears, his mouth twitching into a soft, somber smile.

"TROY!" I screamed, but it was too late. I saw a flash of metal as his pocket knife cut through the cables securing the skiff to the side of the Persephone,

The wave swept over the deck, taking Troy with it.

And then I was falling through the air, the skiff tumbled down into the sea below me. I plunged into the water, the air forced from my lungs from the impact and I sank down, and down, and down into the darkness.

Then everything was still Quiet. As though I were asleep.

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Chapter 41: Friend?

Maeve

"Mama?" I crept into the room, my feet silent on the wide plank floorboards bathed in violet twilight, "Daddy?"

Dad stirred, rolling over and leaning on his elbow as he watched me enter the room, his hair ruffled from sleep. He motioned for me to come to the bed, pulling down the covers as I climbed in between them and laid my head against the mattress, snuggled tightly between their two pillows.

"What's the matter?" Mom asked, rubbing sleep from her eyes as she rolled over, tucking her body around mine.

"I had a bad dream," I sniffled, resting my cheek against her arm. Dad reached out to tuck a lock of hair behind my ear before he laid his head back, facing me.

"What did you dream about?" he asked, his blue eyes dark and focused in the dim light.

"I was swallowed up by water. Lots of it."

"Well, did you swim?" he replied.

"No, the water was too big. I tried, but I was too little, and the waves were too high over my head." I stretched one arm upwards towards the vaulted ceiling.

"Hmm..." Mom said dreamily, on the edge of sleep. "But you learned how to swim this summer, darling. In the lake"

"It wasn't a lake, Mama. It was BIG water."

Dad snorted, his mouth touched with a wry smile, "It was just a dream, kiddo."

"There was someone else with me."

"Who?" Mom asked, stroking my back with her fingers. Her touch relaxed me, making my eyes flutter.

"Was it Rowan?" Dad smiled, closing his eyes.

"No. But he was probably the one who threw me in,"

Dad laughed shortly, rolling over onto his back.

"It was a woman. She was a ghost, like she wasn't really there." I yawned hugely, sleep settling back into my bones.

"She was there to protect you, sweetie," Mom said quietly, tucking me closer to her chest. I sniffled, closing my eyes, trying not to think of the dream where I had been struggling in empty, bleak darkness miles below the surface of an unforgiving sea.

"I'll take you to the beach tomorrow, okay? Just me and you. We can put our toes in the water. You'll feel better," Dad was barely awake, his voice far away and dream-like.

“Do not sleep, my starling. Sleep, my doe...” Mom sang softly, her voice calming me and making my body submit to the slumber I had been rudely awoken from.

I closed my eyes.

I rolled onto my side, water sputtering from my mouth as my lungs contracted, desperate for air. I inhaled through my mouth, deeply, my throat burning and my mouth tasting strongly of salt.

I blinked into the sun. It was blinding, reflecting off the space around me. I sat up, shielding my eyes from the bright orb as I looked around.

Sand. Golden, coarse sand. The beach was at low tide, seaweed lining the shoreline where the tide had risen and then fell away again.

Leaving me behind.

I tried to stand, but my legs wobbled and gave way, and I fell back onto my knees into the sand, the small particles biting into my skin.

I was still in the oversized white shirt, the soaked fabric clinging to my skin. It clung to the thermals as I tried to stand again, this time successfully, and I looked out over the water.

It was calm, a bright turquoise where the beach met the gentle waves.

Troy. Where was he?

“Oh, no!” I cried, but the words came out as a cracking, strained whisper. Where was everyone? Where was the skiff he had thrown me on before before

I remembered the wave that had snapped the masts. I remembered his face as he pulled the knife from his coat pocket, the gleam of metal as he aborted his mission of tying me to the skiff and sliced through the cables holding to skiff to the Persephone instead. He had said something, desperation clouding his eyes as I fell away, down and down and down into the storm as the wave broke over the Persephone and swallowed it whole.

And then I remembered nothing.

I had dreamed of my parents. I knew that for certain. I had seen them clear as day. Mom with her glossy, white hair falling around her face as she scooped me into her arms, Dad with his piercing blue gaze. But I couldn't remember what exactly I had dreamt about. Was that even possible? To remember your dreams within a dream. And my parents had been young in my dream. So young.

How far away they were now. They probably thought I was dead.

I looked around, my gaze settling on the sparse palms and knotted, low hanging trees I couldn't recognize or name. I walked along the sand, my mind jumbled as I tried to piece together the fragmented memories of the storm.

"Oh, Myla," I whispered as I gazed back over the water, seeing nothing but sparkling blue water and softly capped waves. This tangled web I found myself in, by no fault of my own, was destroying everyone I loved one by one. First Gemma, then Ernest. Now Myla and Cleo.

And Troy.

I walked into the palms, sitting down on the shaded sand and cried. Oh, how I wished I could take it all back. I would have been nicer to him. I would have told him how I really felt. That I wanted him. That I needed him.

That I loved him.

My throat ached as I swallowed against the lump in my throat, my sobs of despair and heartbreak dry and choked as I tried to regain my composure. I needed water.

But the only water around was the salty, undrinkable water rolling against the sand. The same water already filling my belly and making me even more dehydrated. I looked around, seeing nothing but an endless beach.

If I was alive... if I had survived, surely someone else had. Surely the other three skiffs had made it off the boat to safety.

The thought was enough encouragement to make me rise to my feet and turn towards the trees, where the sparseness of the brush eventually gave way to thick, almost lightless jungle.

I moved into the jungle, walking for what felt like hours. The sun was low in the sky now, casting an orange glow through the trees and thick, wide-leaf vines. Birdsong erupted around me as I walked and startled the creatures lurking on the forest floor around me. Lizards scurried up the trees as I passed, their forked tongues flicking in warning.

Night fell. My feet were bare and aching, the skin blistered and raw from sliding over wet tree roots. A chill swept through the jungle, making me shiver and hug my arms around my chest to try to warm myself. I had been walking all day, never once coming across a bubbling stream or freshwater pool. Even the large leaves of the vines held no water. The only water was in the air, a suffocating humidity that during the day had caused me to sweat profusely and now stuck coldly to my skin.

I entered a clearing shadowed by a large, moss-covered rock. I leaned against it, sinking onto my bottom with my head resting against the moss, closing my eyes.

The night sounds of the jungle erupted around me as my breathing slowed. The chirping of frogs, the scurrying of small critters in the brush.

But then I heard something else, something bigger, moving through the dense foliage. I opened my eyes wide, adrenaline prickling my fingertips and making the hair rise along my arms as the thing grew closer, and closer. Then it quieted. A sniffing sound. I paled, pressing my back against the rock and holding my breath as the creature stepped into the clearing, moonlight glistening along its back.

It was a pale gray in color, its fur short and its body oddly elongated and desperately lean. Its legs were long, its back legs slightly longer than the front legs. A long neck and narrow face with a long, skinny snout and small ears. It was a strange-looking creature, and it must have thought the same thing of me as it peered at me from the other side of the clearing, its small head tilting side to side.

I had seen dogs before, but nothing like this. They were always small, fluffy creatures tied to leashes and paraded around the more affluent neighborhoods in Mirage. This was not a small creature, or a fluffy one. It was tall and lean and practically naked, its odd coloring a sharp contrast to the dark green of the foliage behind it.

'Friend?' came a voice within my mind. I blinked, shaking my head at the intrusion. I could only mind-link with my family since I wasn't twenty-one yet, but this creature was trying.

'Friend?' It said again, nervously lowering its head. It was trembling, its small, round eyes fixated on mine.

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Chapter 41: Friend?

"Can you understand me?" I said aloud, my voice dry from lack of use and severe dehydration. It straightened its neck, fear evident behind its eyes as I spoke.

"Can you understand me?" I said over the mind-link, an odd feeling tightening my chest. Was I really talking to a dog?

The dog just stared, its tail wagging once in reply.

"Are you a shifter?" I asked.

It snorted, shaking its head rapidly. I held my hands out, slowly reaching towards it, inviting it to me.

"I won't hurt you." I said aloud as it took one step forward, gingerly lowering its snout to sniff the ground around me. It was feet away, too far to touch

"Wolf,' it said, baring its teeth.

"No, not yet,' I answered, shaking my head.

It stepped forward, sniffing my foot and then the tips of my fingers before taking a step backward and sitting back on its haunches.

'What's your name?' I asked.

"Dog.' it replied, its tongue lolling out of one corner of its mouth. I laughed, unable to stop myself, which startled the creature. It arched its back and reared away, still seated, obviously unaccustomed to the noise.

"I won't hurt you, friend." I said, reaching out to it again.

It stretched its neck, sniffing my fingers and then licking them, its tail brushing back and forth through the mud.

"Here?" It asked, tilting its head.

"Why am I here?" I'm lost. I need to find water. I'm hurt."

"Drink

"Yes, drink. Can you show me where?"

It sneezed hugely, shaking its head.

"Water, I-" I said, but the dog stood, dancing in a tight circle before pouncing towards me, its front legs bending playfully.

"Me!" It said, running into the brush. I stood, gaping after it as it pounced excitedly through the foliage, its strange-shaped head popping up yards away

it barked excitedly, turning in a circle once away, beckoning me to follow.

"Well," I said to myself as I rose, using the rock for support this creature is either going to lead me to water, or back to its people."

The dog, which I had realized was very much a male as he stopped and lifted his leg to pee on the side of a rock, was very thin, however, Maybe he was out here all alone and was half starved? Some long forgotten passenger from a shipwreck, perhaps? I thought about asking him, but his infantile language over our mind-link made me question how much he could actually understand other than basic commands.

He had understood water, at least.

We walked through the night, the dog always several yards ahead of me, his snout occasionally snapping to attention when something small ran in the space around us. Finally, we reached another clearing, and I almost fell to my knees in thanks when the sound of trickling water flooded the air,

A pool of water was being fed by a small waterfall, the area around it flat and cool in the shade of several large, vine covered trees. The dog whined excitedly, doing a little dance as I ran to the water's edge, scooping the cold,

fresh tasting water into my mouth and closing my eyes as it cured the painful, burning dryness in my throat.

Once I had drunk my fill I sat back, watching as the dog lapped at the pool and then sat a few feet from me, watching me closely. I reached to him, smiling broadly.

“Thank you, friend’, I said.

‘Friend. Water.’

“Yes, you found water. You saved me.’

The dog stepped towards me, trembling, and licked my hand, allowing me to reach up and scratch him behind the ears. He liked this, leaning his head towards my touch and nuzzling my arm. Eventually he curled into a perfect, although boney, ball beside me, his head resting on my thigh as I sat back against a tree and closed my eyes, thankful for his warmth.

I slept like the dead, a dreamless sleep. I woke to the sound of frantic barking in my ear as the dog nudged me with his snout, licking my face between barks to wake me up.

“What’s that matter?*” I yawned, looking around the clearing.

Through the trees, I could see the beach. Golden sand swirled around huge, black rocks. Waves broke over the rocks, sending a massive spray of water up into the air. The beach was only a quarter mile away, based on my judgment.

I stood, patting the dog on the head assuringly as he trembled by my side.

And then I saw it. Something shining in the sun. I squinted, focusing on the object just along the tree line where the beach met the jungle.

It was a boat. A skiff. The very same as the skiffs that once hung from the side of the Persephone.

And then I was running.

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 262

Chapter 42: The Right Path

Hanna

The figure was in the distance. A woman. Her long, red-blond hair was floating around her head like a halo as she drifted limply in the water.

She wasn't supposed to be here.

I moved towards her, looking up to see the surface of the water high above my head.

This wasn't right. I was far away from where I usually dreamed. The water was warm, the sun casting a sparkling glow across the surface as I moved through the stillness towards the woman, reaching out to grasp her by the arm.

I could feel life within her still, though the pulse beneath my fingers was slow and irregular. A rope was tied around her waist, the end of it floating several feet above her head.

Holding her by the arm I kicked my feet, moving towards the surface of the water. She was weightless, her hair falling over her face as we rose from the blue depths, our heads breaking through the surface into blinding sun.

A wave came, the water seeming to whisper to me as it took the woman away.

Had it thanked me?

I looked around, treading water in search of where the woman had gone.

But a grinding sound made me look over my shoulder. I blinked, my mouth dropping open in shock.

The white building in my dreams was before me, so close I could see the symbols etched into the stone. It was built into a rock striped with veins of granite, camouflaged from view unless you knew exactly what you were looking for.

A single wave could have brought me to it. I was that close.

But the grinding sound turned into screams of terror and agony. All around me the sky erupted into angry noise. People were yelling, voices lifted in desperation and despair. I reached up to cover my ears, shaking my head and closing my eyes.

No, no, no!

Suddenly, I was pulled beneath the water, the dream unraveling around me into nothingness.

Rosalie

*How often is she doing this?" I asked, reaching into the linen closet to pull a stack of blankets from a shelf and handing them to Rowan, who was standing with me in the upstairs hallway. He shrugged, tucking the blankets under his arm as he followed me through the house to the guest room.

I had sent Gretchen, our housekeeper, home hours ago. I was surprised by Ethan's quick return from Red Lakes. I was even more shocked when he climbed out of the seaplane with not only Rowan, but two young women in tow.

I hadn't recognized Kacidra at first, since she had grown into a beautiful young woman compared to the shy, quiet girl she had been when her family visited over ten years ago.

But my heart had nearly stopped when Hanna stepped off the plane, her dark hair pulled away from her face and her eyes shining in the sunlight. I thought it had been her mother standing on the dock at first. My heart beat rapidly against my chest as I watched Hanna move like a shadow behind Rowan, her hand tucked into the crook of his elbow.

Hanna's mother had had powers even I couldn't fathom. But they were dark powers. I felt it the moment I met her.

I could feel them in Hanna, too.

And when she collapsed to the ground in the middle of the dining room, her body seemed to pull the water out of the air as her clothes became suddenly damp and water began to soak onto the rug beneath her. I knew something was amiss. This girl, so quiet, so innocent, was battling an inner force she had no control over. It was something even I didn't understand.

“I never saw it happen, not like what happened after dinner,” Rowan admitted, helping me fit a new sheet over the mattress, “She always came to us soaking wet. Like she had been swimming.”

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Chapter 42: The Right Path

“Ah, I see.” I said quietly, racking my brain for some semblance of understanding. We made the bed in silence, my eyes grazing over Rowan’s face, his mouth sunken in a frown.

“Does she talk to you much, sweetheart?” I asked, fluffing the pillows.

Rowan shook his head, “No, not really. A few words here and there.”

“Dad says she’s your mate”

“She is,” he said abruptly, his eyes catching mine. “She is my mate.”

“He also said your bond with her is weakened by –whatever force is–”

“By her dreams. Yes, I believe you’re right.” There was an edge to his voice, something that told me he would rather talk about anything else. I could feel the tension radiating off his body, his brow furrowed in inward contemplation.

He was leaving for Valoria in a few hours with Ethan and a handful of warriors while I stayed behind. It had been my decision to stay, even though I was desperately worried about Maeve. Word had come to Winter Forest about the invasion only an hour before Ethan’s plane touched down on the water.

Maeve was strong, however. She would have gotten herself to safety. She would have fought.

And something in me was keeping me grounded to Winter Forest, some kind of pull that was heightened by Hanna’s arrival.

This is where I was supposed to be. For now.

I could hear Ethan’s voice drifting up the stairs as we left the guest room and walked into the hallway. He was standing in the living room, talking to the

warriors he was bringing on his quest. I smiled softly to myself, shaking my head. Rowan arched his brow, his hand on the railing of the stairs.

“What Mom?”

“Your father, he’s excited.

Rowan narrowed his eyes. “Why would he be excited about dropping into a war zone?”

“Because it’s been a long, long time since we’ve seen conflict. I know that sounds • insane. He’s been a little bored, I think. Playing the diplomat for so long.” I waved my hand in dismissal, passing him on the stairs before he could catch the soft blush rising on my cheeks.

I had had the faintest of memories burst to the surface of my consciousness as I spoke, remembering Ethan when I first laid eyes on him the day I woke up in the hospital in what had been the original Drogomor territory. Everyone had been fearful of Ethan then, his gaze like knives as he scanned the room, focusing on me with intensity. I had been so young, so meek. And he had been a force to be reckoned with.

His demeanor had softened over our years together. He leaned into fatherhood with a gentle touch, his rough edges smoothing to a fine finish as he spent his days with our children.

But he was still Ethan. He would always be Ethan.

And now Alpha Damian was going to see just what Ethan was capable of.

We had had no news of Maeve or Ernest. Ethan had sent word to Georgia and Talon, but chances were likely they wouldn’t know about the invasion for another few days. All Ethan could do was go to Valoria and find these things out himself.

“When do you leave?” I asked as I turned to Rowan as he stepped off the stairs. He was facing towards the living room, but turned back to face me, his face drawn with fatigue and anxiety.

“Soon, I think I’m just going to wait for Dad. I’m packed already.”

You’re going to be fine, Rowan, Everything will be fine. You’re ready for this.

He nodded once then leaned down to kiss me on the cheek before he turned towards the living room, slipping inside and leaning against a far wall as he waited for Ethan to finish laying out their plans.

I sighed heavily, letting my shoulders droop as I made my way through the house to the den, where Hanna had been resting with Kacidra after her latest episode, Kacidra looked up over the sectional couch as I entered the room, smiling softly and tilting her head towards Hanna, who was curled up around a pillow on the other side of the couch, asleep.

“The guest room is ready for you two upstairs,” I whispered, smiling at her. Kacidra was a sweet girl, I liked her a lot. I was only slightly disappointed that she hadn’t been Rowan’s mate, but I couldn’t be too upset. Hanna was a nice girl as well, just strange. I’d get to the bottom of it eventually

“Thank you.” Kacidra replied, her voice wavering. I could see hurt behind her eyes.

“Can I talk to you for a moment? Somewhere private?” I tilted my head towards the hallway, motioning her to follow.

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Chapter 42: The Right Path

If anyone knew a thing about Hanna and her strange powers, it was Kacidra.

Ethan

“We’re going to land on this lake,” said the pilot, pointing at the screen in the cockpit of the airplane. I nodded, knowing full well we couldn’t expect to land at the port like usual. We’d be overrun by Damian’s men in a matter of minutes. But the lake was far enough removed from the city of Mirage and the castle for Damian to even notice our presence.

“Great, that’s fine.” I replied, clapping the pilot on the shoulder before turning around and walking out into the narrow cabin, nodding my head at the warriors who were seated and talking quietly amongst themselves. We would be taking off shortly. I exited the plane, jumping down on the dock where Rosalie was waiting, her white hair glowing in the moonlight over our heads.

I took her in my arms, holding her against my chest and bending my head to kiss her neck, then her lips.

“I’ll be home soon, I promise.”

“Don’t promise me anything yet,” she smiled, shaking her head.

“I’ll find her. I’ll bring her home.”

“Bring them both home, please,” she said, turning her face to Rowan, who was standing out of earshot, his head bent close to Hanna’s as he whispered something inaudible into her ear.

“We’ll be fine here,” she reassured me as I looked at Hanna, slightly suspicious.

“Watch out for her, Rosalie. I have a weird feeling,”

“She’s just a girl. She doesn’t know what she can do, not yet. I’m going to help her.”

I gave her a look that told her to be wary, but she brushed me off, standing on her tiptoes to kiss me again.

Rosalie

The pilot had started the plane, the engines sending an eerie vibration across the water. Rowan was suddenly at my side, hugging me quickly before he followed Ethan inside the seaplane, looking over his shoulder and waving as the door closed behind him.

*Please, Goddess,” I prayed, closing my eyes, “Bring them back to me.”

“Maeve’s alive,” Hanna said, appearing next to me. I jumped, startled by her sudden presence.

“How do you know that.”

“I got her out of the water. I didn’t know it was her, at first. But you have pictures of her around the house. Something is wrong. There was something wrong about my dream. She’s not where she’s supposed to be.”

I gaped at Hanna, ignoring the plane as it began to pull away from the dock.

“She was in deep water. Warm water-”

“Why,”

*But she’s alright now. She found them. She’ll be on the right path soon, I think.”

Hanna was looking out over the water, her eyes focused on nothing and everything all at once.

“Who did she find?” I asked, adrenaline prickling through my veins. Hanna was talking in riddles. I briefly wondered if she might be dreaming right now.

But Hanna looked at me, smiling. She let out her breath, looking up at the moon. “Who is Seraphine?” she asked, and I felt as though the dock had fallen from beneath my feet.

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 263

Chapter 43: Captain vs Captain

Keaton

Robbie hoisted me up onto the Persephone, and my eyes immediately scanned the damage on the deck.

“Pick,” I said shortly, looking at the masts that had been snapped, the shredded sails, and the piles of debris covered in seaweed.

I looked back over the railing at the sandbar where the Persephone had run aground, and then to the beach where two of the four skiffs had made it to shore.

“We didn’t take on much water, only in the engine room,” Robbie said, shaking his head, “Her hull is intact. We’re not sinking.”

“Good. That’s good,” I said through gritted teeth, “Drop the anchor. We’ll see how she floats at high tide.”

Robbie nodded and called out the command to the few crewmen who had followed us to the ship along the sandbar. They were all busy cleaning up the mess the storm had made.

We should be dead. All of us. The Persephone should have been laying on her side beneath several fathoms of water. We had gotten the younger crewmen and the women off the boat just in time. But not Maeve.

I saw Troy standing near the railing, looking out over the water. What could I possibly say to him right now?

“You should go back to shore,” I said as I stepped towards him, “She might have made it to the island. We were in the shallows when—”:

He looked over his shoulder at me, his eyes telling me everything I needed to know. Absolute heartbreak, utter dread. He was covered in bruises and scratches. Deep cuts ran along his chest. He had a black eye and a deep purple bruise along his jaw. A bloodied nose.

He looked as though he had been through a meat grinder. Even his arm, the break in it which had only just begun to heal, was hanging limp at his side, bruises covering it from shoulder to wrist.

“Troy, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he breathed, looking back over the water, “This is what you wanted, wasn’t it?”

“Don’t you dare blame this on me. I lost three crewmen,”

“I lost Maeve.”

The words were biting, meant to be harsh. I swallowed, shaking my head as I turned away from him and walked along the deck, kicking at long pieces of rubbery seaweed as I went along.

Troy stood in the same spot for an hour before turning around and walking to the other side of the ship, disappearing over the railing and down a rope ladder we had unfurled.

“The boys are draining the water from the engine room and gathering whatever can be salvaged of the masts. The extra sails are water logged but are in perfect shape. She’s going to be seaworthy soon. Very soon.” Robbie came up beside me, pointing to the various men as they went about their tasks.

“You got this?” I asked, tilting my head towards Troy, who was walking along the sandbar towards the camp.

Aye, I do,” Robbie assured me regarding the ship.

“I need to make sure he doesn’t go into the jungle and kill himself,” I said shortly, snorting with mirth.

I climbed down the rope ladder, jumping down the last few feet and landing in the wet sand. At high tide, this whole area would be under water, but right now you could see the expansive reef and colorful fish that swam about, their scales reflecting off the sun.

However long we’d be here, we’d be able to eat at least, I thought, watching a very large crab scurry across the sand and disappear back into the water.

“Hey!” I called out to Troy, breaking into a jog to catch up to him. Troy quickened his pace, turning sharply away from camp as he continued along the sandbar. “I command you to stop!” I said sharply, breaking into a run.

But as I caught up to him, he turned around, his fists clenched into fists, “Go away, Keaton!”

I stopped short of him, panting, my hands resting on my knees as I caught my breath. “I don’t trust you right now, Troy. I know you’re upset

but—”

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Chapter 43: Captain vs Captain

“Don’t even try to make sense of how I’m feeling,” he spat, fury flaming behind his eyes, “Go back to Myla. Go back to the ship, or the crew. Leave me alone, Keaton.”

“And what will you do? Hmm? Drown yourself? Over her? There’s plenty of women—”

My words were cut short by a cracking blow to my lower jaw, the impact knocking me backward into the sand. I spit blood from my mouth, squinting up

at Troy as he towered over me, his jaw clenched and shoulders tight with furious tension.

*I deserved that I said, spitting more blood into the sand.

“Do you have anything else you want to say?” he growled.

“Only that you’re a stupid motherfu—”

He grabbed my leg, swinging me like a rag doll and slamming me into the sand. I took a second to recover from the blow, then stood, rushing him and driving my elbow into his chest.

It went on like this for a few minutes, the two of us beating the living hell out of each other for no reason other than we were alive and that we could. I had egged him on for a reason, knowing he was more dangerous to himself than to me, or anyone else.

Take it out on me, I thought, just as he wrapped his arm around my neck, pulling me backward into the sand.

“What the hell is the matter with you guys?” Myla. I strained my neck to the side and saw her approach, a long piece of driftwood in her hands, wielding it like a sword. Troy loosened his grip as her voice rang out over the sandbar, just enough for me to tuck my chin to my chest and slam my head back into his nose.

Ah! You piece of— He let me go, bringing his hands to his nose. I stood and began taking off my clothes, tossing my shirt down on the sandbar.

“Come on, Troy, shift. Let’s finish this!”

“Don’t you dare shift!” Myla screeched, her voice harsh with a motherly edge to it. I looked at her hoping, like a lovesick pup, that she had seen me headbutt Troy and was impressed by it.

“If you two idiots are done,” she exclaimed, sticking her stick in the sand, “I’m going to go look for Maeve.”

Troy sat up, a glimmer of hope in his eyes. “Do you think—”

“I’ve known her long enough to know she wouldn’t go down without a fight, so yes, I really believe she’s alive. And she’s gotta be around here, somewhere. Do either of you know where we are?”

I shrugged, but Troy nodded, rising to his feet.

“We were blown off course. We’re southeast of where we need to be. This is the coast of the southern continent, the Forgotten Jungle.”

“Forgotten Jungle?” Myla said, looking from Troy to me.

“Uninhabited lands,” I said quickly, glaring over at Troy. “Which means, if we need parts for the ship we’re screwed.”

A strange sound came from the beach and the three of us turned toward it, watching as the people making camp on the shore swiveled their heads to the thick trees.

It came again, three or four yelps in rapid succession. The hair on my arms rose, my skin prickling with adrenaline.

“Was that,”

“Barking.” Troy said as he took a step towards the beach, his eyes narrowed as he scanned our surroundings.

“Wolves?” Myla pulled her stick from the sand, gripping it tightly lest she needed to defend herself.

Troy shook his head, his brow knitted as he concentrated on the sound, “It sounds like

a dog?”

“A dog?” Myla laughed, then quieted, her face flashing with confusion. “A dog? From where? I thought you said this land is uninhabited—”

Troy was sprinting across the sandbar towards the shore.

A figure had emerged, her pinkish blonde hair shining in the sun.

“Oh, Goddess. It’s Maeve. MAEVE!” Myla cried, tossing her stick to the side as she ran after Troy. I looked over my shoulder at the Persephone, where men were crowded along the railing to watch what was happening.

Maeve

I felt my heart leap into my chest, a sob escaping my throat as I ran to him, throwing my arms around his neck. He sank to his knees, his face buried against my neck as he held me to him. I kissed his forehead, then his cheeks, and then fully on the mouth, tears streaming from my eyes.

He rested his head on my shoulder for a moment, a choked laugh escaping his mouth. “I thought I’d lost you.”

“I thought you died!” I exclaimed, squeezing him. “Did you just – lick my cheek?”

“What?”

Suddenly he threw me in the stand and stood, his teeth pulled back in grimace as he looked down at the dog, who was sitting back on his haunches, his wet tongue lolling out of one side of his mouth.

“What the hell is that thing?” Keaton said with a laugh, holding a bloody rag to his lip as he approached. Myla squealed with delight, falling to her knees in front of the dog and scratching him behind the ears with vigor.

“It’s a dog,” I said, matter-of-factly.

“Are you sure?” Troy crouched down, peering at the dog with marked suspicion.

“That has to be the ugliest creature I’ve ever seen. Besides you, Troy, of course,” Keaton quipped, a strange, knowing smile on his face. Troy glared at him.

I looked from Keaton and then back to Troy, the excitement of our reunification fading away as I noticed the fresh bruises and bloody noses. “Is that all from the storm?”

“No. These two were trying to beat each other to death right before you showed up,” Myla said, rising to her feet. The dog circled around her, then leaned against her leg, whimpering for more of her attention.

“Why?” I asked.

“Is that thing a shifter?” Troy interrupted. Keaton let out his breath, thankful for the subject to be changed.

“No, he’s not. He’s just a dog,” I answered.

“How do you know?” Troy shuffled his feet, crossing his arms over his chest as he looked down at the dog.

“I asked him, and he said he wasn’t.”

“You what?” Keaton said, shocked.

“... I asked him,”

“You can talk to him?” Myla was intrigued, and slightly jealous, I assumed, as she looked down at the dog, patting his head lovingly. Myla had always wanted a dog, but Cleo had straight up refused.

“Yes can’t you?” Everyone looked at me, then broke into peels of laughter. “What’s so funny?”

“I think you might’ve hit your head during the storm-” Keaton began, but I interrupted him.

“No, he really can talk to me. I think I washed ashore on the opposite side of the island sometime yesterday morning. I wandered around for an entire day looking for water. He found me last night. He asked me if I was a friend through the mind-link-”

“We’re not on an island, princess,” Keaton said, turning away from me to talk to Myla.

“What,” I began.

Troy pulled me to the side, out of earshot from Keaton and Myla. “Did you just say this thing communicated with you over mind-link?”

“Is that weird?” I asked, looking over at the dog, who was glued to Myla’s leg.

“Uh, yeah. That’s super weird. He’s not a shifter, you’re sure?”

“I’m sure. His communication is infantile. Like I’m talking to a toddler. One-word sentences.”

Troy ran his fingers through his hair, giving me a curious look. He looked like hell. “Someone is missing him, Maeve. This means there’s people around. Did you ask him about that?”

I shook my head, “No, I didn’t. We walked through the night, and I didn’t see or hear any other people, anywhere. Not until I saw the skiffs on the beach, and he was the one who alerted me to your presence.”

“Can you talk to all animals, or just this one?”

“I don’t think I can. Nothing has ever. I’ve only ever been able to mind-link with my parents, and Rowan. No one else has ever come through.”

He nodded, trying to understand.

“Can we keep him?” I asked.

“Absolutely not!”

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Chapter 44: Waves of Emotion

Chapter 44 : Waves of Emotion

Maeve

The camp was nothing more than a few large canvas tents spread out across the beach above the tideline. I sat next to Cleo around a small fire, hugging my knees to my chest as we watched the skiffs dart around the Persephone in the high tide, looking for leaks.

“The ship is definitely floating.” Myla said as she approached our circle, handing out bowls of some kind of stew. I accepted a bowl, thanking her as I straightened my legs and rested the bowl on my thighs.

Cleo was looking out over the water, her gaze eventually shifting to the starry sky above us as we ate our soup in silence. “The stars are so clear,” she said, setting her bowl down in the sand, “It’s truly amazing. You can see everything.”

“No lights,” I said with a smile, following her gaze, “I don’t remember ever seeing the stars in Valoria, especially near Mirage. But back home

– swallowed against the lump in my throat, feeling incredibly homesick.

I was sick of the heat, honestly. I felt sticky and filthy all the time. I thought Valoria had been bad with its thick humidity, but this place was far worse.

It had been two days since I washed up on the beach. We didn’t have much to do but wait, and watch, as the crew of the *Persephone* tried to mend the boat. Olly had us fetch water all day long, insisting that he boil every bucket before using it for cooking, washing, and drinking. Meran had brought her goats and chickens on shore, letting them roam just within sight. The dog proved to be a great companion to have around. He spent his days watching over the chickens, alerting Meran if they began to stray too far into the brush.

“I think they’re close to finishing fixing whatever was wrong with at least one of the engines,” Myla said, stirring her soup, “That’s what Keaton told me, at least.”

“How are things going with you two?” I asked, smiling softly to myself as she blushed.

“Oh, it’s been great. Kind of a shock, of course.”

“I don’t know if shock is the best way of describing it,” Cleo laughed.

“Oh? Do you have a better word for waking up from a coma to finding your mate on a pirate ship, learning your house burned down, and your pack was taken over by a rival Alpha, then getting swept up in a hurricane and spending your first few nights with your mate sleeping in the sand?”

I laughed, shaking my head as I looked back over the water, watching as the two skiffs made their way back to the shore.

“You’ve hardly touched your soup, Maeve,” Cleo scolded. I shrugged, bringing my knees to my chest again.

*I'm not very hungry."

Cleo gave me a motherly look of disapproval, then looked away, leaning into a conversation with Myla.

I let the night wrap around me, enjoying the cool breeze coming off the waves. I saw Troy jump off one of the boats, walking through the waves as he guided it up onto the sand. He was smiling.

I asked what had happened to him after he cut the skiff loose. He had been reluctant to talk about it at first, but eventually opened up about it the night before as we laid in his tent on nothing but a blanket over the sand.

He thought he was going to die. He was sure the ship was about to go under. He hadn't seen me go into the water, or that I had missed the skiff by only a few feet. He had been tossed across the deck, crushed against the railing by the wave that nearly tipped the Persephone on its side.

But the ship righted itself, continuing to thrash back and forth in the water for another two hours before the storm passed over. Troy had managed to climb up the stairs to the helm where he gripped the steering wheel for dear life, trying to angle the boat over the waves in a way it wouldn't tip the boat or take on too much water.

"It was only Keaton and I left on board, neither of us willing to leave each other or the ship behind. He had gotten the women onto one of the skiffs. I thought you were with them. It wasn't until I saw them lower it into the water that I realized you weren't there," he had said, guilt racking his voice.

I told him what I remembered, which was practically nothing after I hit the water. I tried to remember what had happened in the water, but it was though my memory had been wiped clean of the trauma. I told him about trekking through the jungle and the dog finding me, about the pool of water and seeing one of the skiffs reflecting off the sun.

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Chapter 44: Waves of Emotion

We had laid there for a long time in total silence, my head resting against his chest. I fell asleep to his heartbeat and the slow roll of the tide.

“Hey,” he said, sitting down next to me and breaking out of my musings. He had a bowl of soup in his hand, resting it on his knee as he threw another piece of driftwood into the fire.

“Hey.” I breathed, my stomach clenching as the smoke blew in our direction, the sharp, salty smell of the burning driftwood making me feel slightly nauseous.

“Not hungry?” he asked, motioning towards my untouched bowl. I shook my head, my stomach turning as I looked at the bowl sitting tepid in the sand. Troy arched his brow, looking from me to Cleo, and she exchanged a knowing glance with him before settling back into her own soup

“I think I should go to bed now,” I said, not likely the look that had passed between Troy and Cleo. A wave of fury washed over for no reason, my mood changing abruptly.

“I’ll join you in a-”

“No.” I said to Troy, the word coming out harsh and slightly cold. I cleared my throat, mumbling an apology under my breath before walking briskly up the beach to the row of tents that sat along the tree line.

I could feel their eyes on me. I hated it. I just wanted to be alone all of a sudden.

I slipped out of my shoes, a pair of leather sandals several sizes too large for me, and set them outside the tent, careful not to track sand onto the blanket. Supplies had been brought off the Persephone after the storm and carried on the skiffs to the beach camp: clothes and linen and food mostly. I felt much better after changing into a fresh shirt and pants, and laid down on the blanket with my knees tucked against my stomach, my arms wrapped around the pillow.

Then, I cried. And for no reason at all.

“Maeve?” Cleo lifted the tent flap, her voice soft and motherly like usual.

“What?” I sniffled, burying my face in the pillow.

She exhaled deeply, stepping into the tent and sitting on the edge of the blanket, her hand hovering over my ankle for a moment before she touched me, gently, the weight of her hand a slight comfort as I continued to cry. “We need to talk, my dear.”

*About what?” I reached up to wipe the tears from my face, feeling totally idiotic. I never cried just for the hell of it. I rarely cried at all, in fact.

“Have you started your period yet?”

I looked up at her, glaring, “Why?”

I honestly hadn’t thought about it at all since leaving the castle. It hadn’t crossed my mind once. I counted back in my head, trying to get a

grasp on the time that had passed, but the days seemed to blur together.

Cleo tilted her head to the side, her fingers pressing into the skin just below my ankle and sending a sudden rush of comfort and fatigue through me. Ah, pressure points. She was always doing that to her patients.

I sat bolt upright, looking at her. Cleo was a midwife. She worked with the pregnant women in Old Town and even Mirage on a daily basis. At least, she had, before everything got turned upside down.

“It’s not due yet,” I said quickly, swallowing the anxiety budding in my throat, “I have another week, I think.”

She shrugged, a soft smile on her face, “Premenstrual syndrome, then.”

“What?”

“Your attitude at the fire, Maeve. Do you always snap at Troy like that?”

“Yes, actually. I do.”

“Well, you had an attitude with me as well. And you never do.” She watched me closely, her eyes taking in my face. It was almost as though she were trying to look inside of me, to catch a glimpse of what was happening inside my body at that moment. I felt exposed.

I laid back down, reached over to pull the thin, tattered blanket we had been using to keep warm at night over me in an attempt to hide from her gaze.

“I won’t even ask if there’s a chance you might be pregnant because, well, you very well could be. If circumstances were different, we could probably rule that out right now.”

“How?” I asked, although I didn’t even want to know. I didn’t even want to think about it.

“This early? Likely a blood test. Even so, we don’t have any pregnancy tests at our disposal here. I asked.”

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Chapter 44: Waves of Emotion

“Of course, you did.” I mumbled, pulling the covers over my head to block her out. She still had her hand wrapped around my ankle, and she squeezed the magic spot again, the sensation rippling through my legs and causing me to relax involuntarily.

“You need to try to eat in the morning. You won’t feel nearly as sick if you do.”

“You’re assuming that I’m actually,”

“You very well may be pregnant, Maeve.”

“And what if I am? What happens then?”

“I don’t know, sweetheart,” she breathed, releasing her grip on my ankle. “We carry on like we’re already doing. Try to survive the next day.”

“That’s all?”

“Well, getting you to safety is the priority right now, if everything Troy said is true.”

“I want to go home,” i breathed, desperately missing my mom. What would she say to me, if she were here?

“We’re going to get you back there soon, Maeve. I know we will.”

“Please, don’t promise me anything,” I said weakly, bringing my knees higher into my chest until I was laying in an almost perfect ball. I heard excited panting near the entrance of the tent, and then Cleo chuckled to herself, patting the blanket near my feet. The dog came in, sniffing the blanket I was hiding under before turning in a circle several times and laying down, his snout resting on my leg.

“Can I tell Troy he can go to bed? Or are you going to snap at him again?”

“He can come to bed,” I said, surrendering.

Cleo stood, stooping as she left the tent, the flap swinging shut behind her as her footsteps crunched in the sand.

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Chapter 45: Duck and Run

Troy

“Look at that thing.” I said to Keaton as we pulled the skiff to shore once again, the high tide beginning to retreat as we dragged the skiff onto the beach. I tied the rope to the stake above the shoreline, double checking the knot before looking back at the dog, who was following Maeve around as if she were a mother duck, and he was the duckling. “That’s it. That’s his name.”

“What is?” Keaton asked, wringing water from his shirt. We had almost capsized the skiff as we broke over the reef where the waves crashed into the shallows with vigor. Keaton had gotten the worst of it, the wave soaking him from the neck down.

“Duck, that’s a perfect name for him.”

“You’re naming the thing now? I thought we weren’t keeping it.”

“Try telling that to Myla and Maeve,” I said, shaking my head.

Robbie was walking towards us, looking out over the water before stopping short of us, allowing us to catch up to him.

“The crewmen we sent out as scouts last night are back,” he said, motioning to the group of men congregating around Olly’s cooking fire. “Pete said they saw no signs of the other skiffs.”

“Any signs of other people?” I asked, running my fingers through my hair.

“No, not even a scent. They did pick up on a lot of wildlife, though. Pete went a little nuts, according to the others.”

“Well, none of the crew has shifted in weeks. I don’t blame him for feeling the urge to chase lizards through the brush.” Keaton leaned over and shook his wet hair back and forth, spraying me and Robbie with water.

“I could use a shift,” Robbie said, wiping the water from his shirt as he glared down at Keaton.

“Aye, we all could. Go ahead, Rob. Let us know if you run into anything worth noting,” Keaton said as began to walk up the beach ahead of us, his sights on Myla.

“Want to come with?” Robbie asked.

“Sure, why not.” I shrugged, glad he asked. I hadn’t shifted since I was at the castle and had access to the grounds.

We walked up the beach for a moment with the intent of letting the others know I would be joining Robbie.

But then I had an idea.

Maeve was sitting on the beach, rolling a seashell in the palm of her hands as we approached. She looked up, shielding her eyes from the Sun with her hand.

“Hey, what’re you—”

“Where’s the dog?” I asked, looking around. Robbie whistled loudly behind me, the sound startling me and making me flinch.

The dog came bounding up the beach towards us, his tongue hanging out of the side of his mouth.

“How big do you think his brain is?” Robbie asked.

“Pretty small. I mean, look at him,”

“Leave him alone, Troy!” Maeve laughed, patting the dog on the head as he came to a stop in front of her and leaned into her, sitting down on one of her knees as he looked expectantly up at Robbie.

“You’re coming with us, Duck,” I said to the dog. He seemed to understand this. He barked excitedly, his tail smacking Maeve repeatedly in the face.

“Ow!” she squeaked, shielding herself from the attack. Duck bounded past us, zooming across the sand in a wide circle at least three times. Robbie watched in delight, clapping his hands as Duck did a fourth circle, kicking sand in his wake.

“Something’s wrong with that thing,” I said, reaching down and ruffling Maeve’s hair just to annoy her. She swatted my hand away.

“What did you call him? Did you say Duck?”

“Yeah, that’s his name.”

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Since when that’s a terrible name for a dog.”

“I’ll tell you later I’m going out for a run with Robbie. We’re taking the dog with us.”

She looked a little upset about this, but I couldn’t tell if it was because she couldn’t shift or because we were taking the dog with us. “You might scare him if you shift

“He doesn’t just appear out of nowhere, Maeve. He was obviously someone’s pet at one point. We’re just taking him seeing what he can do.”

She pursed her lips looking down at the shell in her hands

“Find some more. We can decorate our tent with them. I said, and she glared up at me, tossing the shelt back into the sand. I’d take you if VOU could shift Maeve.”

“How are you even going to run with your arm still injured)

It feels fine, really i insisted. The break was healing just fine, and the bruising from being tossed across the ship was starting to fade. need to do this. Maeve I’m feeling”

know. It’s fine,” she sighed, stretching her legs out in the sand, Just don’t lose my dog, okay?”

I smiled, crouching down in front of her. Things had been easier between us, but there was still an obvious rift. I kissed her, nonetheless, thankful when she returned the kiss with a soft one of her own.

it was a small win.

I resisted the urge to ruffle her hair again, my hand clenching into a fist to stop myself from messing with her just to see the rush of annoyance color her cheeks.

I caught up with Robbie, who was still watching the dog run excited circles around the camp, and soon we were walking in the dense, humid jungle beyond the beach, reaching the freshwater pool.

We stripped out of our clothes, Duck sitting patiently by the water’s edge.

*Try not to scare him. Maeve will kill me if he takes off,” I said to Robbie as I shook out my stiff muscles, moving my neck from side to side

I shifted, wobbling a bit as I pawed the ground, testing out my hurt arm. Well, now it was technically my leg.

Robbie came up beside me, his deep chestnut coat shining in the soft sunlight coming through the canopy of the trees

Duck was staring at us, his eyes wide. He was trembling slightly, his tail slowly moving back and forth on the ground where he sat.

“Do you think he can understand us?” I asked Robbie over the mind-link

'Ask him something, Robbie replied, sniffing the ground.

"What do I ask a dog?' I stared at Duck, tilting my head from side to side,

"Hey, dog!' Robbie said, 'Do you want to GO, GO OUTSIDE?

'We're already outside Robbie,' i huffed, pawing at the ground again. "He can't understand us, man. Don't tell Maeve we tried to do this!

We turned, walking away from the pool, looking back over our shoulders at Duck, who had risen to all fours and was nervously shifting his weight. I barked, once, getting his attention. His ears perked up, accepting whatever silent invitation passed between us.

And we were off, running into the depths of the jungle

It had been a few hours since we left camp, and the sun was beginning to set. Duck was lapping water from a small creek we had found, panting happily as he turned from the water. He was having fun with us, and he had kept up like a champ. That boy could run, that was for sure.

'I reckon he's a greyhound. He looks like one,' Robbie said as he sniffed the air

'Like from the races in Avondale? I haven't thought about that in years, 'I answered, sitting down and resting my front legs. I could definitely feel my injury now. The bone was sore and catching occasionally when I ran.

We rested for a moment, talking about running along the beach on our way back, just to scope things out

But suddenly Duck stilled, his ears perking up and eyes going wide as he lifted his snout to the air and sniffed.

"What is that smell?' Robbie asked as he sniffed. I lifted my snout, smelling.smoke?

'Where is that coming from-'

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Chapter 45: Duck and Run

Duck started to bark, frantic, and then took off into the brush, his head popping up a few yards from us in the brush, willing us to follow.

But it was too late. The smoke was thick, tinged with something that made my eyes water and my nose itch like mad.

‘Troy! We need to get out of here!’

‘What is that-‘

I started to feel numb, my head beginning to spin.

‘Robbie?’ I turned, looking for him. He was laying in a heap on the ground, back in his human form. I looked down, seeing my fingers instead of the dark brown paws I was expecting.

I saw torches, flames dancing in the smoky air as several figures approached, their faces hidden behind strange, distorted masks.

I fell flat on my face as my arms gave way, the smoke filling my lungs.

“Robbie!” I croaked, reaching toward him. But my view of him was obscured by legs. I looked up at the figure as it crouched beside me, tilting its head to the side as it lowered the torch to get a better look at me in the dim, smoke-filled light.

“Get back!” I yelled with all of my might, but my voice came out as a choked cry. What the hell was happening to me?

Robbie groaned as three men picked him up, his feet dragging on the ground as they carried him away.

“Hey! Let him go!” I tried to say, but I had no voice left. A slow, creeping paralyzation was taking over. I couldn’t help but close my eyes, barely noticing as I was picked up and carried away as well.

#*

I woke with a start, my heart practically leaping from my chest as I bent over, my stomach threatening to spill all over my lap. I was slumped against a stone wall, my legs sprawled out in front of me. My legs were tingling painfully as I tried to move them.

“Where the f*ck-”

I saw Robbie slumped in a similar position, dressed in an odd shirt and matching pants made of what looked like coarse, homespun fabric. I looked down, seeing the same fabric on my own body, my arm wrapped in a makeshift sling.

“Robbie!” I hissed. His eyes fluttered as his head fell forward, then back up again, trying his best to wake up.

“Where are we?” he asked.

“I have no idea.” I looked around, seeing nothing but bright sunlight drifting through a break in the stones, the light flooding the space between us. “It’s day, though. We’ve been out since sunset yesterday.”

Robbie nodded his head, then turned to the side, vomiting.

I winced, looking away as my stomach turned painfully.

“Wolfsbane,” Robbie said, his voice cracking.

“Wolfsbane? What’re you—” The realization swept over me. The smoke. The smoke had had a strange smell to it. It had caused us to shift back involuntarily. It knocked us out cold.

And whoever had taken us had been wearing masks.

Suddenly, a door opened, and three men stepped into the room, slamming it behind them. One of the men stepped forward, looking down at Robbie and then over at me. He crouched in front of me, looking into my eyes.

I didn’t have the strength to even turn my head to look at him fully.

“Why are you here?” he asked, his voice lifted in an unfamiliar dialect.

I snorted, shaking my head. “You’re the one who brought us here,” I replied, my mouth numb as I ran my tongue over my lower lip, “Why don’ t you tell me?”

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Chapter 46: Granddaughter of Willa

Chapter 46: Granddaughter of Willa

Maeve

“They should’ve been back hours ago.” i exclaimed, turning towards Myla, who was equally as concerned.

“They’re probably fine, Maeve,” Keaton said, but his eyes and posture betrayed him. He was getting nervous too, especially now that the sun was beginning to rise over the water.

“I’m going to go find them. They can’t have gone far,” I said with conviction, raising my hand to cut him off as he opened his mouth to argue.

“I’m going to-“Myla began, but Keaton rounded on her.

“No, neither of you are going anywhere,” he said firmly.

Cleo was watching the exchange nervously, wringing her hands.

“I’m going!” I said again, just as barking sounded from the jungle behind us.

I spun around as the dog, otherwise known as Duck, came sprinting onto the beach, his ears flat against his head and his body trembling with fatigue.

“Goddess!” Myla cried as Duck nearly slammed into us, laying down on his side.

“I’ll go get him some water,” Cleo said hurriedly as she turned and quickly walked away.

I knelt beside Duck, stroking his back.

“What’s wrong?’

“Danger,’ he said, closing his eyes as he panted, his tongue lolling in the sand.

“Where?’

*Follow,

“Rest now,” I said to him, continuing to stroke his fur. I looked over my shoulder in the direction he had come, a chill running up my spine as the jungle seemed to whisper menacingly in the breeze.

“Did he talk to you?” Myla asked, her eyes full of worry.

I nodded, looking up at Keaton. “He said ‘danger.’ He’s exhausted. Something happened out there.”

* Aye, I can see that.” Keaton crossed his arms over his chest, looking from Duck to the Persephone. And then, he looked at Myla.

“I can’t leave the ship with Robbie and Troy gone. I just can’t-”

“I know, I understand why.” Myla said softly, a knowing smile touching her lips.

“The crew, Myla—”

“You don’t have to explain. We will be fine. I promise you.” She rose to her feet, stepping forward and kissing him hard enough for a blush to rise to my own cheeks. I looked away, giving them a moment of privacy as I checked Duck’s paws for damage.

He wasn’t hurt, but he was desperately thirsty. Cleo returned with the water and had to hold him back by the scruff of his neck to stop him from drinking it all in one go. She offered him some food, and he ate it, licking her hand in thanks.

‘Tired,’ he said, laying his head back against the sand and promptly falling asleep.

“We need to be prepared to go as soon as he wakes up.” I said to Myla, who nodded in understanding.

“You can ride on my back,” she said, bending down to pet Duck on the head, cooing as she did so.

I gave Keaton a tight nod, noticing the greenish tint to his skin. He was absolutely sick over the fact that Myla was leaving on a quest to find Troy and Robbie, knowing full well something had gone wrong.

But he was the captain of the Persephone. He hadn’t abandoned his ship or his crew when the storm hit. He wasn’t about to, now. He just couldn’t.

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Chapter 46: Granddaughter of Willa

“Pete!” He called out, turning and looking down the beach towards the group of men seated around Olly’s cooking fire, plates of fish in their hands

Pete put his plate down, wiping his mouth on his sleeve as he jogged over to us, looking down at Duck.

“What’s wrong with him?” he asked.

“You’re going with Maeve and Myla into the jungle. Troy and Robbie didn’t come back.”

“I was wondering where they were,” he began, then righted himself, straightening his shoulders as he nodded at Keaton, “Yes, Captain.”

*The rest of the men stay here,” Keaton said quickly. “We need to get at least one of the engines running by sundown, tell them.”

Pete nodded, looking at me and Myla before running back over to where the crew was congregating, crouching down as he repeated Keaton’s orders.

Myla and Keaton walked away, their heads bent in inaudible conversation.

Cleo sat next to Duck, stroking him gently as he slept. I walked up the beach towards my tent, my stomach turning over and bile rising in my throat. I quickened my pace, passing the tent and walking a few paces into the jungle, leaning on a tree for support as I retched.

“Goddess.” I whispered, pressing my forehead against the tree, “Please, I can’t lose him again.”

Myla and Pete were sprinting through the trees, jumping gracefully over the massive roots that lined the jungle floor as they raced after Duck. I was gripping Myla’s fur for dear life, ducking under the vines and branches lest I accidentally clothesline myself and get thrown from her back

We had been running for an hour, if not more, but the sun was still high in the sky as we continued deeper into the jungle, my ears popping as we climbed in elevation.

We finally reached a clearing, stopping to allow the wolves and Duck to drink from the creek. Duck was sniffing frantically, his nose leading him around a large rock face and into the dense brush, his ears perked.

I couldn't mind-link with either Myla or Pete. They knew to follow Duck, however, and I trusted their judgment in locating Robbie and Troy.

They followed Duck through the brush, the landscape changing from dense jungle to a wide, open valley of low brush and towering mountains.

I looked around in awe as we continued on. I was not expecting this. We were past the jungle now. We couldn't see mountains from our camp on the beach.

Duck skidded to a stop about an hour later. He looked around nervously, then began to whine. Myla and Pete looked at each other, then sniffed the air, whining to alert me to some smell they were picking up on that was new, and possibly shouldn't be there.

Myla suddenly reared, tossing me off her back. I gasped, the wind knocked out of my lungs as I hit the ground, hard, landing on a rock.

Growling and snarling filled the air around me as I sat up, reaching to rub the tender bruise forming on my back when I stopped, fear taking hold of me.

A group of people were standing around us, surrounding us, holding a variety of spears and long knives. They charged, driving Myla and Pete back into the brush. Duck trembled as he reached my side and nudged me to get me to move.

But I didn't. I got to my knees, then rose to my full height, squaring my shoulders as the group approached.

"Stop!" I bellowed, and to my surprise, they did. They were all oddly dressed and wore masks that varied in shape and color. A murmur passed around the group, and then someone pushed through, a woman, her face hidden behind a mask made entirely of what looked like crushed seashells.

She walked straight up to me, reaching out and touching three of her fingers to my forehead, then took them away, tightening her hand into a fist.

She bowed low, bending at the knees until she touched the ground. The group followed suit.

“A White Queen,” she said, her voice carrying a strange lilt to it as she spoke, “A youth, not yet in her powers.”

Another murmur passed through the group.

“My friends-” I said, watching the woman as she tilted from side to side as though sizing me up. “Are they with you?”

*Two wolves?” she asked, and I nodded.

“Where are they?”

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Chapter 46: Granddaughter of Willa

“Come, I will take you to them.”

“No,” I said quickly, forcefully. Myla was growling at my side, drool dripping off her bared teeth. The woman took a step back, reaching up to remove her mask. “I cannot trust your word, Release them,”

And then I saw it, the same symbol that had been painted all over the map. The same symbol on the altar in the Temple of the White Queens. It was etched into her mask, right over her forehead.

“Wait-” I said, but she took off the mask, pulling a string to release it from her head.

She was beautiful, roughly my own mother’s age. Dark eyes and glossy black hair that was pulled into a tight bun at the nape of her neck. She smiled at me, her cheeks dimpling.

Behind her, the rest of the group began to remove their masks. My mouth dropped open as the group stepped forward. At least a half dozen women

were staring at me, leaning into each other to whisper as I continued to gape at them.

The woman who stood before me reached out again, her fingers brushing against my forehead once more. She furrowed her brow, confusion flashing across her face,

“You’re a vessel for a dream dancer,” she said, letting her hand drop to her side.

“I’m a what?”

She pointed to Duck, who was standing between my legs, “Your familiar?”

“My fam-Oh, um. We found him in the jungle”

“Come, we have much to discuss.”

“Wait a minute!” I said, practically screaming it. A hush fell over the group, all of their eyes watching me as I stepped forward.

The woman turned around, eyeing me with interest.

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“Who is your mother?” she asked. I blinked, suddenly feeling like I was being talked to by a teacher after getting in trouble during class.

“My mom? Why?”

“Are you Loralyn’s daughter?” she asked, a look of hope flashing in her eyes. “Loralyn was my great grandmother,” I said slowly, suspicion gripping my mind. How old did this woman think I was? “How do you know her name?”

“Willa, is she still alive?” she asked hurriedly, her eyes shining with an unreadable emotion.

“No, she-she died when my mother was young.”

“Then you are the daughter of a White Queen. The second in line.” She said this as though she were talking to herself. My chest tightened with apprehension as she looked down at her hands. She brought one hand up,

her fingers in the shape of an L, and held her hand to the sky. “I thought we had more time,” she said softly.

“More time for what?”

She looked at me, startled by my presence as though I had just appeared before her eyes and hadn’t been standing here the entire time.

“Please, come with us. Your friends are safe. They are not our prisoners. The small one, he was hurt. His arm is healing.”

“The small one?” I almost laughed, but then I remember how everyone looked small compared to Robbie. I would definitely be telling Troy he was called the small one at a later time.

“Your mate, he is well.”

“1-you’re mistaken, I don’t have a mate!”.

She smiled at me, a knowing smile, tilting her head to side as she broke her gaze and looked down at Myla and Pete, who were guarding me.

“We are the Daughters of Artemis,” she said, her voice strong and filled with conviction, “We have been waiting for you, Maeve.”

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Chapter 47: Through the Front Door

Rowan

“We’re not that far from the castle, Rowan,” Dad said sternly as he bent to tie his boots. He looked up at me, catching my annoyed expression.

“It would be faster if we shifted-”

“And show up naked to confront whoever’s in the castle right now? No, I think not.”

He did have a point.

I surrendered, leaning against a tree as the rest of the warriors caught up to us, their backs heavy with sacks full of supplies. Dad had said in passing that he meant to take over again, but I hadn't believed it at the time. Seeing the warriors outfitted for battle made a hard lump form in my throat. We were actually going to do this...

It wasn't long before we reached the outskirts of the castle grounds. I could see it rising out of the darkness, amber colored light spilling from several windows.

We crouched in the tall grass, Dad motioning for us to move forward a few feet at a time, the group of us spread wide across the field.

"Do you think Maeve is being held in the castle?" I whispered. Dad shook his head, his eyes shining in the moonlight.

"No, she wouldn't be here. They are holding her somewhere less obvious."

I opened my mouth to question his thinking, but he held his hand up to quiet me. We moved forward.

Suddenly, a shout came from somewhere near the castle, then laughter. I held my breath and winced as a woman began to scream, pleading with whoever was laughing. I winced, my fingers digging into the earth beneath me as I tried to maintain my composure.

Dad motioned to one of the warriors, who took off through the grass towards the noise. I heard a whooshing sound, then a cracking thump.

The woman was crying, gulping for air as she sobbed a desperate thanks.

"Come on, let's move," Dad said, crouching as he walked through the grass, leading up closer to the castle.

"What was that?" I asked.

"I don't know. I don't care. We just can't risk anyone seeing us approach," he answered.

"How are we going to get inside?"

"Through the front door, of course."

I stopped, gaping at him. “What?”

“This is my castle, remember?” He gave me a knowing look, his eyes flaming with long subdued fury.

He wasn’t wrong. He was just going to waltz in like he owned the place, apparently

I had heard stories about my father, but those stories didn’t reflect the man I knew. It seemed I was going to meet the man from the stories tonight, however

We walked out of the grass and onto the pathway leading up to the castle. Dad led the way as we approached the door, and opened it wide, stepping in before the warriors.

It was quiet inside the castle. The front hall was dimly lit by lanterns placed in the corners of the area and on the stairs.

“Why aren’t they using power?” I whispered.

“Because these idiots cut the power to the entire city of Mirage and inadvertently drained the power banks while doing so,” Dad said loudly, his voice booming with purpose and echoing through the front hall. “They don’t know how to fix the mistakes they made. And they will pay.”

Footsteps sounded in one of the hallways. They were light, their tread soft against the stone pavers as they neared.

A woman appeared, her glossy platinum blonde hair falling thinly over her shoulders, her black eyes shining in the lantern light. She swiveled to a stop in front of Dad, her fluffy, emerald green gown rustling against the stone floor.

“Who are you?” Dad demanded.

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Chapter 47: Through the Front Door

“Opaline, Alpha of Greenbriar,” she said hotly, tilting her chin towards dad and giving him a sultry look. She bowed slightly, chuckling to herself as she straightened up.

“You’re not the Alpha of Greenbriar-” Dad began.

“My husband is dead,” she replied, pouting her lip sarcastically. Then she laughed again, a shrill sound that echoed off the walls around us. I shuffled my feet, uncomfortable and suspicious of the situation.

“Where is the Alpha of Drogomor?” Dad said, his voice harboring an edge of disdain for the woman.

“Which one? The dead one, or the new one?”

“The false Alpha,” Dad ground out, his teeth bared.

“Oh, ha! There is no false Alpha of Drogomor. His name is Damian, you might have heard of him?” She was being sarcastic, of course, her eyes shining with mirth. “My soon-to-be husband.”

“I see,” Dad said, stepping towards her. She smiled at him, another sultry smile that made my stomach turn. “And where can I find him? I need a word.”

“Oh, of course you do, Ethan Black.”

I arched my brow, shocked by the causal manner in which she addressed my dad.

“Are you on his schedule?” She giggled, walking a circle around him, running her fingers over his shoulders.

He didn’t answer. He stood stock still, his face beginning to twist in mingled fury and frustration.

“I’ll tell you where he is,” she said, leaning into his ear, “if first you come to my bed.”

He reached out and clutched her by the throat, catching her off guard. But her look of panic quickly changed to a look of sheer enjoyment.

“Harder!” She hissed; her mouth stretched in a wide smile. He threw her to the ground, turning back to the warriors and nodded towards the stairs.

Search the castle, find him.”

The warriors ran into the castle, going in several different directions as they spread out. I stood next to Dad, looking down at the woman as she laid against the floor, her eyes fluttering.

“He’s not here,” she said weakly, blood dripping from the corner of her mouth, “Your search will be in vain.”

“Where are Ernest and Maeve?” he asked sharply, not bothered by the fact that the woman’s head had smacked against the stone floor during her fall.

She laughed, closing her eyes, “No one knows. Damian is searching for-for her on the water.”

“The water? What do you mean?”

The man– the breeder... he has something Damian needs. Romero gave it to the breeder. He needs-he needs Maeve to-to- She inhaled deeply, choking on air as her body stilled.

“Is she dying?” I asked, looking down at her.

“No, she’s just being dramatic,” Dad replied, his tone totally casual. I knitted my brow, looking down at the woman as her head slumped to the side. She was still breathing, at least.

A commotion broke out somewhere in the castle and Dad stilled, his eyes focusing on the stairs. Someone up above screamed, then the sound of snarling and clicking teeth echoed through the air.

“Rowan, run,” Dad whispered, his face etched with adrenaline.

“What”

A body came crashing down the stairs, one of our warriors, his clothes torn and tattered as he came to a dead stop on the first floor landing

“Go! It was a trap!”

“I could have told you that!” I yelled, squaring my shoulders, then quickly changing my mind as wolves started pouring down the stairs, jumping over the body of the warrior.

I didn't have time to strip out of the clothes before I shifted, bursting through the seams and flexing my scruff as the wolves came to stop before Dad and I, their teeth bared and dripping with saliva.

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Chapter 47: Through the Front Door

Dad had shifted, his great, black coat standing on end as he lowered his head and bared his teeth, clacking them together.

'We're going to lead them out of the castle and give our warriors a chance to run, got it?' Dad said over the mind-link.

"Yes," I replied.

'Stay by my side,' he said, and then he leapt forward, grabbing one of the wolves by the neck and throwing him against the wall.

Then we were running, bursting through the door of the castle in a shower of splintered wood. The wolves followed us, howling in menace as we sprinted into the tall grasses and into the woods beyond the castle ground.

But I slipped.

I was jumped, four or five wolves pouncing on me and attempting to pull me apart as they clamped down on my legs and tail.

'Rowan!' Dad came bounding to me, followed by at least a dozen wolves, his eyes wide with determination. He howled as he entered the clearing where I lay, slamming his body into one of the wolves and sending it flying through the air. The other wolves let go, startled by Dad's attack. I got up, wobbling as I tried to push forward, long gashes bleeding along my legs.

"There're too many, Rowan. We need to get out of here.'

..

I followed him through the forest, eventually putting enough of a distance between us and the wolves to the point we could only hear them following instead of seeing them right behind us.

Dad was limping, but he didn't stop. We continued through the woods for what felt like hours, until the sound of howling and yelping in the trees behind us finally silenced completely.

'Do you think the warriors got out?' I asked as we stopped to rest alongside a river bank.

I'm sure they did. Damian was expecting us.

'Of course he was,' I said, sinking down along the smooth, circular river rocks. The moon was high in the sky now, the stars glistening around it as I looked up, sniffing the air.

'They will go back to the plane. They know to do that,' Dad said, speaking of our warriors. He pawed the ground, shaking out his scruff.

'You knew this would happen, didn't you?' I said, I had been suspicious of his plan to just waltz into the castle. I knew he had been up to more.

'Damian knows I'm here. He's a nervous man, but an ambitious one. He'll come after me instead of Maeve.'

'But you said Maeve was being held'

'She very well may be, but not by Damian.'

'Then who?'

Keaton, the captain of the Persephone, the ship that intercepted Aaron and the group that held him on an island while one of Keaton's crewmen stood in Aaron's place.' Dad pawed at the ground, then laid down, puffing air from his nostrils, 'I have it on good authority that Maeve is with them.'

'Why didn't you tell me any of this?'

'Because no one could know what I found out. No one. Not our warriors, not your mother. Not yet.'

'Why? This was your plan all along, wasn't it?'

Dad sighed, resting his snout on his front paws, 'There's more to this than Damian's ambitions for power. I know it. And yes, I did. Rest now, tomorrow we go back to the castle and finish what we started.'

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Chapter 48: The Daughters of Artemis

Maeve

I followed the group of women down into a steep, rocky valley. Myla and Pete flanked me on either side, still in their wolf forms. They were beginning to tire, their breathing heavy as we made it to the base of the valley, the sun beginning to set over the mountains to the west.

We approached a wall of vines growing up the side of a rock wall. The trail we had been walking on ended abruptly at the wall, and I looked around, confused.

But then the women walked into the vines, one by one. I followed them, holding back the vines and entering a long, lightless tunnel.

“What?” I murmured, apprehension tingling across my skin. Light began to trickle in, the tunnel opening up to a valley of green, rolling hills and towering cliff faces. I gasped as I stepped out into the light, seeing the buildings carved into the rocky mountain behind me and the waterfall flowing into a wide creek in which several bridges weaved over the water.

“Welcome to the city of Dianny,” the woman said, her dark eyes creasing into a smile. She hadn’t yet told me her name, but based on the fact that her pack mates were coming up to her, bowing their heads in greeting, I assumed she was their leader, or at least their Luna.

The city was ancient, the buildings built into the mountains were totally carved out of stone and towered high above our heads. All of the facades had carvings on them, symbols etched into red stone. The lower levels were painted in colorful, sweeping murals, telling some story I didn’t understand.

I heard a yelp behind me and turned, watching as Myla and Pete were surrounded and led away.

“Hey!” I called after them, but I lost them in the crowd.

“Don’t worry,” the woman said kindly, “They’re not in danger. We will give them clothes and food, and reunite you when they’re rested.”

“Who are you?” | asked, my tone brass and slightly bitter. I was nervous.

“My name is Una. I’m the Alpha of the Daughters of Artemis.”

“The Alpha?” I looked around at the crowd of people that had begun to gather, ripples of hushed conversation surrounding us.

“Yes,” she laughed, waving her hand in dismissal, “Much like the White Queens, we are led by a female line. Come, I will take you to your mate.”

“He’s not,” I shut my mouth, biting my lip to stop myself from saying anything further.

The crowd parted for us as we walked across the soft grass of what looked to be a market square, and soon we passed under the entrance of one of the tall buildings built into the side of the mountain.

It was cool inside the building. It was lined with archways leading back outside, a cool breeze wafting through the open space and as we turned down a hallway, several children ran past us, squealing in delight as they tossed a ball back and forth.

So many people, I thought, how did I not know about this place?

Una motioned me to follow her as she turned a corner. I walked beneath a large, ornately decorated archway into a courtyard bursting with fruit trees and tropical flowers.

“Troy?”

He looked up from the book on his lap, his eyes blinking as he straightened up, looking at me as though he’d seen a ghost.

“Maeve?” He stood, running to me but stopping short of Una, his eyes narrowing suspiciously on her for a moment before stepping forward and pulling me to his chest away from her.

“You were right in saying she would come,” Una smiled sincerely, no hint of cruelty in her eyes.

Troy nodded once, then bent his mouth to my ear, "Who are these people?"

"The Sisters of Artemis," I replied, looking at Una. She smiled again, nodding her head.

"That's impossible," Troy said, looking Una up and down.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"He knows the legends, the myths," Una said, her voice lifted as she began to walk around the courtyard.

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Chapter 48: The Daughters of Artemis

"What myths?" I asked, and Troy opened his mouth to reply but Una continued.

"It'll all be explained, I promise. But first, I must say that you are not prisoners here, any of you. You are able to leave whenever you want, but

_She raised her hand as I opened my mouth to speak, to say we would be taking our leave now, "It would be wise for you to stay, at least long enough for us to show you what is to come."

"What do you mean, what's to come?" Troy took my hand and took a step forward, standing protectively in front of me as Una spoke.

"You will know everything-in time. Now, it is time to rest. I will show you to your room. Follow me," she walked out through the archway and back into the corridor. We followed, glancing at each other as we trailed her through the winding hallway and up several flights of stairs.

Finally we stopped, at least seven stories above ground level, and she led us to a door. She turned, handing me a set of keys.

*This will be your home during your stay, and whenever you decide to visit."

"Visit? Troy looked dubious, but I unlocked the door, pushing it open to reveal the most beautiful room I had ever seen in my life.

The red stone walls were vibrant against the polished, pale wood furniture. Troy's mouth dropped open as he looked up at the half-dome ceiling, a mural painted along every inch.

*This is the White Queen's apartment," Una said, her hand on the doorknob. "Dinner is in a few hours. Please join us in the courtyard whenever you're rested."

She closed the door, leaving Troy and I alone in the incredible space.

I walked over to the window, looking out over the rolling hills and great waterfall that was so close I could almost touch it.

"Did she say 'the White Queen's apartment?'" Troy asked as he walked into the bathroom, running his hands over the giant bathtub that had been carved out of the side of the mountain, the rock polished to a crimson gleam.

"She did," I answered, opening a large wardrobe. It was full of clothes, the fabric a vivid white and soft to the touch. I pulled off my clothes before Troy could even reply, letting a long, flowy dress fall over my shoulders. "Oh, that's better," I sighed, running my hands down the fabric.

*I can see your nipples," Troy snorted, coming out of the bathroom to inspect the wardrobe himself.

"Look, there's clothes for you here too-" | pulled a long, simple white shirt off of a hanger and held it up to him, noticing the strange clothes he was already wearing for the first time. "How long have you been here?" –

"Since last night," he said, taking off the itchy outfit he was wearing and stepping into a pair of soft blue pants, pulling the shirt over his head. It fit him in a strange way, so different compared to the usual garb he wore on a daily basis, but the people I had seen in the square had been wearing similar fashions of loose, flowing fabrics that were lightly dyed. He shrugged, looking at himself in the mirror.

"What happened to you and Robbie?"

He told me everything, how they had been smoked out by what they believed to be Wolfsbane, how they had met a group of men when they awoke, the leader of the group turning out to be a man named Ismir, who just so happened to be Una's husband.

*They fed us, let us bathe. They gave me some kind of tea to help the pain in my arm,” he lifted his arm, rotating it, and clenching his fist. “It feels as good as new. Healed fully, actually.”

*Healed?” I said, a sudden burst of jealousy rippling over my skin. “I thought White Queens were the only ones with healing powers?”

He shook his head, sitting down on the edge of the bed, then laid back against it, closing his eyes.

“You’ve heard of the fable of Lycaon?”

“Of course, everyone has.”

“Well, it’s not a fable. These are his direct descendants.”

“What?” I sat next to him, laying down and propping myself up on my elbow to look down at him as he spoke.

“Yeah, at least, that’s what I’ve gathered in the short time I’ve been here.”

“How is that possible?”

“Well, how are White Queens possible? Aren’t you all supposedly descended from the Moon Goddess herself?”

“Yes...”

“Through Morrighan, the daughter of the Moon Goddess. The twin of Lycaon.”

“Twins? I’ve never heard that part of the story.” I said, falling back against the pillow next to him.

*I don’t know the details, but something is strange about these people, especially Una.”

“You said they used Wolfsbane on you?”

He nodded, sighing deeply.

“Where’s Robbie?” I asked, swallowing against the tightness in my throat as I thought of Myla and Pete being led away.

He shrugged, rolling over to face me. “Robbie has a room here too, I think. They kind of just... left us to our own devices. We weren’t prisoners at all. The ladies here love Robbie.”

I laughed. “What do you mean?”

“After we ate, we were taken to the square to meet Una. I told her my crew would be coming for me, but that seemed to be exactly what she wanted. I overheard some women talking about Robbie, saying how his offspring would be big, strong wolves. They seemed to be, well, more than willing to give it a shot,”

“Are you saying Robbie is off enjoying the company of a woman right now, Troy?” I laughed.

“Probably more than one-”

“Oh, okay. Thank you for that image.”

Speaking of that,” he said softly, a slight purr to his voice. He rose onto his elbow, bending down to kiss me, taking my lower lip between his teeth

“You want to do this? Right now?” I mumbled, melting into his touch.

“Why not? We’re alone. We’re probably safe, at least for the time being. Wait-” He looked around the room, his muscles tightening in concern, “Where’s Duck?”

“Last I saw, he was chasing some kids around in the square,” I breathed, pulling him back to me and kissing him fully.

“Who came with you?” he asked, breaking away from the kiss.

“Myla and Pete. Keaton stayed behind.”

“We can’t mind-link here, Maeve,” he said quickly, reaching to stroke my face as he spoke. “There’s something about this place, I just can’t put my finger on it,”

For some odd reason, I didn’t have the faintest desire to talk about our predicament. All I wanted was Troy. I pulled him back to me again, locking my legs around his as I lifted my hips to him, silently begging him to take me.

He hiked up my dress, matching my urgency with his own.

The room seemed to spin as I laid there, weightless, his touch sending electric sparks through my skin.

I looked up at the ceiling and the mural seemed to move, to come alive, the small figures of white wolves dancing in the soft evening light above Troy's shoulder.

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Chapter 49: The Sacred

Maeve

Troy and I walked through the building, surprised by the amount of noise coming from the corridors as we headed down the many, many stairs to the lower-level courtyard.

The buildings are where everyone lives, stacked on top of each other," Troy said, smiling as a little girl ran past us, chasing after what must have been her older sister.

*This place is ancient, Troy. How old do you think this place is?"

Troy exhaled, looking around as we walked towards the courtyard, reaching up to run his hand along the wall.

"A thousand years, maybe more?"

"More?" I sucked in my breath, unable to process it.

"Well, how many White Queens have there been over time? Count back and that's likely as old as this place, and even Winter Forest, should

be."

"Mom said Winter Forest wasn't the original settlement of the White Queens. There's a ruin on an island across from the inlet. That's where the pack used to live, but everyone believes it was taken over by the water hundreds of years ago."

“See? This is very, very old stuff.”

I nodded, swallowing against the anxiety tightening my chest and throat. This was an old place. A strange place. And I had the oddest “out of body feeling as we walked the halls. We finally turned the corner and passed through the archway leading to the courtyard, stopping short of the entrance as Duck came bounding towards us, followed by Myla and Pete.

“Where’s Robbie?” Troy asked, furrowing his brow.

“He’s out chasin’ tail, Myla said with a laugh. Pete blushed deeply, lowering his gaze to his feet.

“Still?” Troy snorted, shaking his head.

“So, you saw him? And he was alright?” I asked hurriedly. Myla nodded her head, wiggling her eyebrows at me and Troy.

“Oh, he’s more than alright, I’ll say that much. He told me all about it,” Myla said.

“Why?” Troy asked, looking from Myla to Pete, who was looking more and more uncomfortable with the conversation.

“Why not?” Myla said with a soft chuckle, “What else were we supposed to do while we were waiting for you guys to come down? What were you up to, anyway?”

Troy cleared his throat, and I stifled a blush. Myla arched her brow, puffing out her cheeks as she tried not to laugh.

“Alright!” Pete said, annoyed, “Please, can we talk about something else?”

“Pete is a little jealous-” Myla began.

“I am not!” Pete was blushing. And I had the opportunity to, you know, do what Robbie is doing...”

“Why didn’t you take it?” Troy laughed, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Petey here is saving himself for his mate.” Myla teased.

“Leave him alone, Myla. I think that’s very gallant of you, Pete.” I said, smiling at Pete, who gave me a small smile of gratitude.

“Dinner is starting, if you will follow me,” came a voice from behind us. We turned around, finding a young girl standing still as a rod in the archway, her eyes wide with nerves as she spoke. She was young, very young, likely no more than ten or eleven years old. She turned on her heel, and the group of us followed her through the corridor and out into the square, but we didn’t stop there.

We followed her through the market and across one of the narrow bridges rising up over the river. People were swimming in the slowly moving, shallow water. It looked like a refreshing activity in this unforgiving heat. I made a mental note to do the same before leaving this strange place

After a few minutes of walking, we entered a narrow gravel pathway leading downhill into another shallow valley through a thicket of trees. Stepping out of the trees, we stopped, all of us looking out over a massive, turquoise colored lake that was sparkling in the light of the

setting sun.

At the lakes edge were several buildings made of the same red stone as the towers at the city’s entrance. Music was wafting up from the lake, and voices lifted in gaiety and laughter rang out as we walked along the path, nearing the party.

“Wow!” i said beneath my breath, inadvertently taking Troy’s hand as we passed beneath several rows of paper lanterns that were strung through the trees. It was beautiful, and quite romantic, and I felt a sudden urge to find a dark corner and rip Troy’s clothes from his body.

I blushed deeply, clearing my throat. Troy looked down at me, squeezing my hand. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing. I’m just losing my mind,” I murmured, feeling a little hot. What was wrong with me?

“Oh, I wish Keaton were here to see this!” Myla exclaimed, looking up at the sea of paper lanterns above our heads.

“Hey, Myla!” Troy called out, “Have you been able to mind-link with him since getting here?”

She pursed her lips, shaking her head, “No, I tried but I couldn’t get through. Do you think we’re out of range?”

Troy shook his head, sighing deeply. He bent his head close to mine as we walked, “Something is weird about this place. Do you feel it too?”

“Yeah, definitely.” I replied. “But I don’t think these people are going to hurt us.”

“Neither do I,” he said firmly, but his eyes were still hyper focused on the area around us.

The girl led us out onto a wide dock. Flowerpots lined the dock, and sprays of flowers I couldn’t name were in full bloom. The deep floral smell was intoxicating.

A pallet of blankets and plush pillows had been laid out around a huge, circular table that was low to the ground, and Una was sitting there, waiting for us, flanked by nine unfamiliar faces.

Troy stiffened suddenly, then relaxed, nodding to one of the two men sitting on the cushions. The older man must have been Ismir, Una’s husband. The younger one couldn’t have been older than sixteen.

“Come, friends, sit with us!” Una said, excitement evident behind her eyes. We sat around the table, as did the young girl, who elbowed her brother before taking a seat next to him. “This is my family,” Una said, beaming with delight, “My mate, Ismir, and our children.”

“You have eight children?” Myla said, her eyes wide, and a look of sheer longing on her face.

“Poor Keaton,” Troy whispered, leaning his head close to mine as we sat down.

“Mhmm,” I replied, watching Myla gush over Una’s brood. “Myla will have ten children, I’d bet my life on it.”

“And how many will we have?” Troy asked, his voice low and filled with yearning. I hadn’t expected it. I looked at him, seeing the confusion flash behind his eyes, his tanned face blushing deeply the same way mine had when I imagined ravaging him in public. He hadn’t meant to say it aloud

What is it about this place that is making us act, and think, the way we were?

“Four,” I answered, looking directly into his eyes, my heart quickening as he knitted his fingers in mine underneath the table, “All boys.”

“All boys?” He laughed, his eyes creasing with what I can only describe as pure, unadulterated joy.

I opened my mouth to say something, but the words were lost, hanging on the tip of my tongue, just out of reach.

I love you, I thought, unable to say it..

Several large platters of the most delicious food I had ever tasted were brought out over the course of three hours. Hot, spiced tea was poured in a constant stream despite the warmth of the night.

On several occasions, my eyes met Una’s, who was watching me closely, a look of mingled hope, and maybe even fear, etched across her face.

Una’s eldest daughter, Tasia, was seated next to Robbie, who had joined the table late, his face pink, and his eyes unable to hide the fact that he was having the best day of his entire life.

Tasia was a true beauty, curvy and strong, with an angular face and thick, glossy black hair that fell over her shoulder in tight ringlets. Her eyes were a strange color, however, a shade of gray that reminded me of the color of the inlet back home. Gray like glacier silt, the clay left behind as the glaciers moved across the land over the millennia. Neither of her parents had the same color eyes as she did, nor did any of her many, many siblings.

“Tomorrow is the full moon ceremony.” Tasia said, her mouth stretched into a wide smile. “We celebrate it the entire day and into the night.”

* That sounds wonderful!” Myla said excitedly.

glanced at Troy, an unspoken question passing between us. Are we staying?

Why not? He seemed to reply, his eyes shining in the light of the paper lanterns.

Whatever was happening between us was being exasperated by whatever was in the air of this place. Mutually, we weren't ready for it to end

Tasia was chatting away with Myla, who seemed at home in this place. I wondered briefly if Keaton would ever put down roots somewhere, especially now that he had a mate. I couldn't imagine Myla spending the rest of her life aboard the Persephone, ten or more kids in tow.

Troy's hand was on my thigh, his fingers inching down to pull up the hem of the dress and run his hands against my bare skin. I shivered, a warmth spreading over my body.

Oh, how I wished we were back in the apartment right now, alone.

Eventually Una rose, and we were ushered to the shore of the lake, where more cushions were laid out, and we sat under the stairs.

Myla, Robbie, and Troy were loose and lighthearted with drink, and Pete was curled up on one of the cushions, fast asleep.

I was sitting next to Troy, his arm wrapped around my shoulder as he contributed to a spirited conversation with Ismir and Robbie about what had happened during the storm.

But suddenly, I was flanked by Tasia and Una, who appeared as though out of thin air. They didn't speak to me, not out loud, but a silent conversation was passing between us as we looked out over the lake, then up to the stars.

I felt dizzy as though I had been drinking, even though I had not.

"What is it about this place?" I asked aloud, looking to Una for a reply.

She smiled at me, then looked at Tasia, who was grinning broadly.

"You feel it, too?" Tasia said, her voice soothing to my ears.

"What's happening here?" I asked, trying to make sense of it all.

"This is a sacred place, Maeve. We walk on sacred ground, drink the sacred water, and eat the food grown from sacred soil. She's all around us, here."

“Who?” | asked, feeling suddenly overwhelmed.

*The Moon Goddess, of course,” Tasia laughed, touching me gently on the shoulder. “Don’t you know why you’re here?”

“What? |—” I looked over at Troy, finding him staring back at me with a look so intense it sent a shiver up my spine. I felt like rising, like going to him, placing my hands on him just to feel the electricity pass between us. “Why am I here?” I asked, but the words were carried away in the gentle breeze,

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Chapter 50: In the Center of the Stones

Maeve

The next day passed in a blur of activity. The city was buzzing, practically electric as Myla and I moved through the market square, the note from Una inviting us to a private, women only ceremony to invoke the full moon was scrunched in my fist as we pushed through the crowd.

“Did you feel, I don’t know, strange? Last night?” I asked Myla as we walked towards the river.

“Um, no. I guess not. I was missing Keaton, though. Why?”

*-It’s nothing,” i murmured, biting the inside of my lip.

“Well, do you feel strange, Maeve?” Myla asked.

“Yeah, actually. There’s something about this place that feels off to me. It doesn’t feel real? If that makes sense.”

Myla nodded soberly, lowering her gaze as we crossed over the narrow bridge, “I do understand that feeling. This place is too good to be true, I think. I don’t want to leave.”

“Neither do I,” I breathed, admitting the fact lifting some tension from my shoulders.

Troy and I had left the lake before the rest of the group, barely making it back to the apartment without tearing off each other's clothes. Once inside, he had pushed me up against the door, pulling the dress over my head and holding me there at arm's length, looking at me as though for the first time.

The sex had been desperate, passionate, so unlike the awkward fumbling lesson in the art of passion like it had been on the ship. He had pushed me to the edge several times, leaving me begging, practically pleading with him as he covered my body with his lips.

I would have done anything he asked. I would have said anything he wanted. I had surrendered to him wholly for the first time, and I knew nothing would be the same after that.

And as I laid back on the bed, listening to his rhythmic breathing as he slept, I counted the dancing white wolves on the ceiling. Nineteen. Twenty. Twenty-one...

"What do you think this ceremony is going to be like?" Myla asked, bringing me back down to reality.

"Troy said they're probably going to sacrifice one of us." *

Myla sputtered with laughter shaking her head, "Goddess, Maeve. I hope it's you. My hair hasn't looked this good in years! What a waste that would be."

I couldn't help but laugh. Myla's teasing, somewhat abrasive, sense of humor was a compliment to my own. She was not a serious person. I wondered how she got on with Keaton, who seemed to be fixed, and dependent, on his serious, dry nature.

We walked along the lake in the opposite direction of where we had dined the night before. The sun was close to setting, the sky a soft, navy blue as we continued along a well-beaten trail.

"This is a hike," Myla panted as we began to gain in elevation, the trail becoming uneven and broken up by large boulders.

"Where is this place? I thought we would've found it by now," I replied, looking up at the mountain that seemed close enough to reach up and touch its peak with my fingertips.

“I dunno, but if I had known we would be doing this, I would have just shifted and had you carry my clothes.”

* You still can,”

“No, no. I can do it on my feet. Just – She reached down, taking off the platform sandals she was wearing. Just not in these shoes!” We continued up the trail, Myla carrying the sandals by their straps as we trudged forward.

We crested the top of a hill, looking over a field of large, uneven boulders. The trail disappeared into the field, reappearing on the other side.

* You’ve got to be kidding me!” Myla exclaimed, looking over at me for support.

I shrugged, looking out over the rocks, creating a course of action in my mind.

*It’s not so bad, just follow me. This will be quick!” I jumped down onto the first boulder, hopping my way across. It was fun, a physical challenge, especially in the ankle length dress I was wearing. Myla followed, a few boulders behind me, cursing audibly as she leapt from rock to rock on her bare feet.

Fifteen minutes later, we were across and back on the trail, the sun setting behind us. We crested another hill and finally looked down at the small congregation of women, arranged in small groups near the center of a circle of standing stones.

“What the hell – Myla said, pausing at the crest.

“Maybe Troy was right,” I said, arching my brow.

“Yeah, this is creepy. One of us is definitely getting sacrificed.”

We looked at each other and laughed, wiping tears of mirth from our eyes as we approached the circle.

The stones towered over the women who were chatting amiably as though the eeriness of the place had no effect on them whatsoever.

“You made it!” Tasia said excitedly, hugging us both in greeting, “I was worried Mom was too vague in her directions.”

“She, uh, definitely left a few things out,” Myla said, looking around.

“What is this place?” I asked, touching one of the stones. A jolt of electricity ran through my fingertips, and I pulled them away, clenching my hand into a fist as my ears began to ring. Tasia was watching me, her mouth slightly open as her eyes focused over my shoulder. I

turned around, seeing Una standing alone on the other side of the circle, her eyes fixating on my own as I met her gaze.

“What was that?” I asked, turning back to Tasia, but she was gone, moving through the groups as she leaned in to speak to the other women. Everyone started to move around, forming a semi-circle just outside the stones.

Myla and I fell in line, shuffling our feet in the soft grass as we looked around, eventually looking at each other.

“What happened when you touched the stone?” she whispered, but I shook my head, watching as Una walked into the circle and turned around to face the group, her body at the center of the circle.

*In the beginning, she was only a woman, the same as us,” she began, her voice cutting through the stillness, “but only isn’t a good word for a woman, is it?”

A murmur spread through the group, the women nodding in agreement.

“Her womanly powers were a gift to her people. She was their leader. She cared for them with her strength. Her hands tended to the land they called their home. Her voice comforted the sick, the dying, the mothers in childbirth as they brought forth life into the world. And so, she was blessed, given special powers by the earth beneath her feet and the wind that blew across the land. A gift by ancient, all knowing and unidentifiable gods, making her the steward of their creation. She was Leto.” –

“Leto.” The group said in unison. Myla and I looked at each other.

*Who’s getting sacrificed,” she whispered, “me, or you?”

“Probably both of us,”

I was cut off by a sudden movement within the group, several women stepping forward, their bodies twirling in a practiced dance. The sun was

nearly set, the sky beginning to glisten with stars as the first sign of the moon crested over the peak of the mountain we were facing.

The women entered the circle, dancing in the silence, weaving in and out of the spaces between the stones. I tried to swallow, but my mouth had gone dry.

“She blessed her people with the greatest gift, a selfless gift. Eternal mates. Fated by the divine.”

“I don’t like this, Maeve,” Myla whispered.

I was incapable of moving, my eyes fixated on the dancers. My heart seemed to beat in rhythm with their steps as they moved.

“But Leto was a woman, despite her great powers. One day, she, too, found her mate. She was too hasty, too driven by the same gift she had so graciously given to her beloved flock to see the errors of her ways.”

“We should leave – Myla sounded panicked, her hand reaching out through the darkness to clasp my own.

“She was an immortal one; no harm could come to her. Time could not touch her. But with her mate, she had two children, and as she watched her children grow, she watched her mate grow old and weak.”

I let go of Myla’s hand, an unexplainable force pulling me towards the stones. I fought it, taking a step backwards, pain radiating up through the hand that had touched them.

“She used her powers to pull a great moonstone from the earth, the size of her palm,” Una said, raising her hand palm up towards the sky, “and with it she gave her family the gift of immortality.”

“I want to go, Maeve!” Myla’s voice rang out through the night, echoing through the congregation. No one spoke. No one turned their heads to us.

“I can’t-”

“But Leto’s mate was unfaithful to her. Leto had grown too strong, too powerful. Her mate plotted with their son to steal the stone and leave the sacred land. In her rage, she took back the stone and cursed her mate,

turning him into a wolf. He fled, but he was too old and too weak to survive his journey. In her despair, she broke the stone in two, breaking the power that held her bound to the earth, and the wind, and the water. She disappeared, never to return.”

The dancers were moving quickly now, their movements more erratic as the moon fully crested the mountain peak and began to shine down on the clearing, inching towards the stone circle’s center.

“Her mate’s curse became our blessing, our power. We shift to honor her gifts; we run in our wolf bodies to honor her sacrifices.”

The moon was huge, shining brighter than I had ever seen it before. I was drawn to it, reaching out to touch it, willing it to drop into my hand.

“Maeve!” Myla screeched. I blinked, turning to her voice.

I was standing in the center of the stones, looking back at the semi-circle of women. The dancers were gone, and Una was standing at the circle’s edge, her eyes full of moonlight.

“Legend says a girl child will come, born out of love rather than duty, a child of Morrighan the beloved, the first White Queen. Twenty-One white wolves to complete the cycle to bring the stones together once more, to bring Leto home.”

I felt as though my body was disintegrating, every cell burning with heat. I screamed, terror ripping through me as I closed my eyes to the moon as it fell over the center of the circle. –

“This was lost,” came a voice I didn’t recognize, so close I could feel their breath against my ear. My hand formed a fist around something small, something practically weightless and I opened my eyes, looking down as I slowly unfurled my fingers.

My hand was wet, water dripping from my fingers, a ring laying in the palm of my hand, a red gem glistening in the moonlight. I looked up at the congregation of women, some of which had dropped to their knees or fainted, the rest gaping in collective shock.

Myla was crying, silent tears pouring down her cheeks, I turned my head, my eyes catching on Una’s face, her brow furrowed in confusion.

“What the f*ck just happened?” I cried, closing my hand around the ring.

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Chapter 53: Following Destiny

Troy

Duck was bounding up the beach ahead of us, his tongue hanging out of the side of his mouth and slapping his snout as he ran. Robbie was sulking behind me, his feet shuffling in the sand.

“Come on, man. We have to go back for the girls, you know,” I said, looking at him over my shoulder. He huffed audibly, like an animal, but refused to keep in step with me. Robbie hadn’t wanted to leave Dianny. He had met someone, but refused to talk about it to anyone, which was probably because Myla would tease him relentlessly if she found out.

Oh, Keaton was going to have my head over the Myla situation.

I could already see him storming down the beach towards us, his face twisted in anger.

“Where is she?!” he bellowed from several yards away, his voice booming over the sound of the waves lapping against the sand. I waved at him.

“Nice to see you too!”

“Shut up, Troy. You useless,” His words were drowned out by the sound of the waves crashing over a large rock as we passed by. High tide. I turned my head to look over at the Persephone. Its masts were mended, and people were climbing the rat lines to help hoist the sails back into place.

“She’s fine. She felt she needed to stay back with Maeve and Pete,” I said, stopping short of Keaton, who was fuming with frustration.

“Fine? You’ve been gone for three days, and all you have to say to me is that she’s fine?” He crossed his arms over his chest, cheeks reddening. “And... at least a dozen complete strangers show up at our camp saying they’re going to fix our ship with nothing but primitive tools,”

“Looks fixed t’ me,” Robbie said with a chuckle, tilting his head towards the Persephone. Keaton reddened further, his eyes glazing over with righteous fury.

“What exactly are you doing back here? Hmm? Without the women? You brought this useless dog but not- Keaton pointed down at Duck, who interrupted him by licking his hand and leaving a trail of slime along the cuff of Keaton’s coat. “Ugh!”

“There’s a lot to explain,” I said, running my fingers through my hair. How the hell was I supposed to explain everything that had happened?

“Obviously! And what’s wrong with you, Rob?” Keaton stepped forward, giving Robbie a quizzical eye. It was unlike Robbie to sulk.

“Robbie has a girlfriend”

“I found my mate.”

I nearly snapped my neck turning to face him. Keaton and I stared at Robbie, jaws slack in communal shock.

“I’m

gonna stay behind.” Robbie tucked his hands into his pockets, rocking on his heels.

I looked at Keaton, who looked at me, and we broke into peels of laughter.

But Robbie wasn’t laughing.

*Wait, you’re serious?” Keaton wiped a tear from his eye, his face falling as Robbie’s cheeks pinkened with mingled embarrassment and dismay

“Robbie?” | coaxed, my stomach tightening to a knot. Robbie had been markedly absent during most of our stay in Dianny, but Myla had made it seem like he was merely enjoying himself, not that he had a mate somewhere in the city.

“Aye, it’s true. Her name is Alison. And she won’t leave Dianny. I’m gonna stay back while you guys, well, chase the stones.*

“Chase the what? Wait a minute—” Keaton began.

“Keaton, look-” I interrupted, holding my hands up in surrender, “We’re going through the southern passage. All the way through. There’s an island

“Oh, no, no, no, Hold on just a minute – Keaton took a step forward. “You’re staying behind? And you–” He turned to me, pointing his finger accusingly. “Are not the captain of the Persephone. Who said you get to dictate

“I’m the second captain,” I said, pausing to clear my throat. Now or never. “And if we don’t go through the pass, Maeve’s mother is going to

die.”

“...So? What does that have to do with the Persephone and my crew?”

“If we don’t go through the pass and find Lycaon’s Tomb,” I continued, reaching out and grabbing his hand, folding his pointed finger back into place, “All hell is going to break loose.”

Keaton pulled his fist back and swung at me. I reared back, dodging his blow, and then bent my head to rush him.

But suddenly Robbie was between us, holding us at arm’s length by the collars of our shirts. He slammed us together, my nose cracking against Keaton’s forehead. “I’m staying,” he said calmly as Keaton and I staggered backwards. “I’ve been breaking up your fights since we were lads. I’ve done my time. Better start getting along now.”

I rubbed my nose, glaring at Keaton, who was holding his head in his hands and hissing in pain. I straightened up, happy to be the first to regain my composure as Keaton continued to try to get a grip on his own.

“I was hoping you were abandoning this treasure hunt, Troy!” Keaton said, spitting into the sand as he straightened up.

“Not a bit. It’s even more imperative that we find the tomb now, before someone else does.”

“And what if we don’t? You’ve heard the stories about the Pass. Treading water in the southern channel is one thing, Troy. Going through is a death sentence. No one ever comes back.”

“We will,” I said quickly, “We don’t have a choice.”

“And you’re really leaving us, Rob? You’re sure?” Keaton turned to Robbie, squinting into the sun to look up at him. Robbie only nodded.

Keaton sighed deeply, looking at us for a long time. Then he straightened up, planting his hands on his hips. “The only reason I’m letting any of this continue is because of Myla.”

“Not because we are likely to be blacklisted from doing any type of business in the pack lands for the foreseeable future?” I said with a smirk.

*And whose fault is that?” Keaton said, his eyes dancing with menace.

“Mutual fault,” Robbie replied before I could even open my mouth, “We should have never gotten into business with Damian in the first place.

Robbie was right, of course. But I stole a glance at Keaton, who tilted his head, considering.

None of us would’ve met our mates had it not been for Damian. We had to give the man that.

Maeve

“What happens now?” Pete tossed a bag into the boat, looking over his shoulder at the group of onlookers standing along the edge of the

lake.

*What you’ll miss all the attention?” Myla waved her hand in dismissal, stepping into the boat and sitting down on one of the benches. She ran her hands along the wooden hull, admiring the craftsmanship. Pete scowled, picking up the last bag of supplies.

“We’re famous here,” I said sarcastically, reaching up to tie my hair into a bun on the top of my head. It had been a full day since Troy and Robbie left to go back to camp. Robbie had returned in the morning, relaying a message from Keaton and Troy that Troy would be waiting for us at the beach instead of coming to fetch us from Dianny.

Robbie had also told us he would be staying behind, and I could see why. He was standing along the shore of the lake, his arm around a tiny blonde woman with dainty features. She was the physical opposite of Robbie, but somehow,

the two of them fit like a glove standing side by side. I felt a pang of regret at the sight. Robbie, Keaton, and Troy had been all they had growing up. They were a family. A pack.

“In you go, Princess,” said one of Una’s warriors as he extended his hand to help me into the odd wooden boat. It was incredibly long and sturdy, carved out of a single tree that must have been massive and ancient, given the size of the boat. The three of us, plus two of Una’s men, fit comfortably inside.

“How long of a trip is it to the camp?” Myla asked as the first warrior climbed into the boat, sitting towards the back with his pair of oars draped over his lap.

“An hour to cross the lake, another two or three to float down the river to the shore,” he answered.

“And then we row along the coast? That seems dangerous!” Myla said, her shoulders tightening with nerves.

* That’s what you’re worried about, after everything that happened here?” Pete quipped, sitting down on the bench beside Myla. I let out my breath, looking out over the crowd of onlookers.

I spotted Una in the crowd, Tasia by her side. They caught my eye, nodding soberly as I gave them a soft, knowing smile.

How had been caught up in this web of myth and lore? What were once fanciful children’s tales were coming to life, overwhelming me. Una had called it my destiny, but I wasn’t so sure. Was finding the missing moonstones truly my life’s path?

Una herself had said she had reservations about the moonstones being brought together, none of us knowing what would happen when they did eventually combine.

And as I sat in the strange boat looking at Una and Tasia, mother and daughter, I wondered if I had made the right choice by choosing to find the stones over warning my parents of upcoming danger. But what had my choices truly been? To try to go back home, risking capture by Damian? No, that wasn’t an option. I couldn’t return to Winter Forest without the moonstones. They were the only way to save my mother’s life and prevent the prophecy from taking hold and dismantling the pack lands.

The boat began to move away from the shore, the two warriors pulling us forward with their oars. We glided soundlessly across the still, turquoise water until Dianny was just a speck in the background, and the jungle enveloped us once again.

Myla and Pete were talking in hushed voices as we bobbed gently in the clear, depthless water. The warriors were silent, focused on the task. I felt alone with only my thoughts.

But I wasn't alone, not really. My hands went instinctively to my stomach as I looked out over the water.

I was pregnant. And Una had told me I was having not one, but two sons.

I swallowed, closing my eyes and imagining them snuggled inside of me, tiny orbs within my womb.

And I hadn't had a chance to talk to Troy about it before he left for the beach camp. Did he know? Had Una told him the same thing she had told me?

My life at the castle of Drogomor felt like a lifetime ago, but the day I met Troy in the market was clear and vivid in my mind. Would I have done things differently if I had known then what I know now?

"No," I whispered, the word for my ears only.

Troy was more to me now than just a breeder. He had always been more.

And now, he was the father of my children.

I looked up as the water began to move more swiftly, the boat rocking as we entered the river. I looked back, seeing the red mountains rising in the distance, the outline of the moon still visible in the clear, blue sky.

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 274

Chapter 54: What Happened to Seraphine?

Rowan-Valoria

Boy, did things unravel.

We hadn't been able to sleep for long before Damian's warriors found us again. Dad led us deeper into the forest, crossing the river and attempting to back track towards Mirage, but it was too late. The forest was full of wolves. We were two against an impossible force.

"What pack did that woman say she was from?" Dad said, his voice cracking over the mind-link as we began to climb up the base of the mountains, our paws slipping on the uneven, fragile shale rock.

"Greenbriar, I think," I answered, my legs sore and hips aching from the exercise. I ran in my wolf from every single morning and had done so for years. But spending over twenty-four hours as a wolf was causing an indescribable exhaustion and something I had never experienced before.

Plus, I was watching my dad's plans fall through, and he was pissed. Especially after we crested the top of a cliff face looking over the forest and our plane buzzed the top of our heads.

"*Damnit!" he said, turning his head to watch it ascend into the clouds.

'That was us, wasn't it

'Yes, obviously. Come on, we have no choice but to keep going. They're pushing us into the mountains, and we're outnumbered-'

The mountains? What exactly are you planning,

'I was wrong, Rowan. There's too many of them. I hadn't expected Damian to have made alliances with other packs in Valoria, especially without my knowledge. We have to get home

"By crossing the mountains? Are you insane? That'll take us weeks!"

.

Howling drifted from the trees below as we continued to climb, and I winced, torn between two impossible paths.

How did I prefer to die? Being torn apart by wolves, or dying of exposure in the mountains between the North and Valoria?

'We have no choice. They're expecting us to travel through the forest until we reach the Northern Tier. Stop whining, let's go.'

I followed him up and over another ridge, padding further and further into the clouds until I finally looked down, seeing a full view of what had once been Mirage. Fires burned in pockets across the city. I could see the destruction of the buildings from our perch. And there was the castle, standing like an untouchable fortress amongst fields of golden grass.

And ahead of us?

I looked up where Dad had stopped and stretched his legs.

Nothing but miles, and miles, and miles of stone.

One Week Later

* Who did these belong to?" I asked, pulling the jeans on and tucking in the sweater I had pulled over my head. Dad was lacing up a pair of boots, grimacing as he pulled the laces taunt.

"Really want to know?" he said through his teeth as he tied the other boot. We were sore and dead tired, having spent nearly a week trudging through overgrown valleys and over the peaks of snow capped mountains.

But the terrain we were in now was remarkably changed, the once perfectly sculpted mountains giving way to deep craters and sharp, uneven peaks. Nothing grew here, and fields and fields of boulders marked our journey between valleys. This hadn't been what I was expecting. The mountains were far east, lined by thick, almost impenetrable forests.

We saw a flag. A familiar flag. Waving in the stiff, unrelenting breeze. The flag of Winter Forest.

The flag had marked the entrance to a narrow cave opening and inside we had found bodies.

Dad had stood at the cave's entrance for a long time, peering into its depths. We didn't speak as we inspected the bodies, still fully dressed under layers of rotting fabric. He counted them, one by one, and after we found their backpacks, we shifted and changed into the spare clothes they had brought on their journey.

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Chapter 54: What Happened to Seraphine?

“Who are they?” I asked, running my fingers through my matted, filthy hair. The bodies were nothing by bone by now, and must have been here for a long, long time. But their clothes were surprisingly modern compared to how old I thought they must have been.

“The missing explorers. They’ve been here for roughly fifteen years, give or take.”

“You mean the expedition you sent out when I was a kid? Really? This is them?” I looked down at the bones at my feet, my stomach tightening as the memory of their departure from Winter Forest, all of us watching and cheering them on as they disappeared into the forest, bound for the mountains.

I remembered looking back at Gemma, who had tears in her eyes as she watched her mother lead the group. Seraphine had looked back at her, smiling, and blew her a kiss.

They never came back.

“Seraphine? Is she-” I tried to remember what Seraphine might have been wearing, but they had dressed in a similar fashion for the journey. It was damn near impossible to tell them apart.

“Two are missing. I’m not sure,” Dad said briskly, tossing an empty backpack out of the cave opening. He turned back, walking deeper into the cave where it was dark enough to swallow his body whole.

“Dad!”

“I’m here. I’m not going to go far. Look through the packs for anything like flashlights or matches. They had a fire in here, I can see the ash on the cave walls.”

I did as I was told, rifling through each of the backpacks. I collected two matchbooks that were in decent shape and at least half full, and a lighter that

was dry, useless. I also found a compass and popped it open, noting we were facing exactly due North.

“What were they looking for?” I asked as Dad came out of the darkness. He had his hands tucked into the pockets of the jacket he had found as he scanned the ground once more, crouching down to examine the bodies.

*Seraphine convinced me to have a team sent into the mountains. No one had ever crossed the mountains before, at least as far as we know. Generally speaking, when we travel by land from the Northern Tier to Mirage, we do so through the forest, but she was convinced there was more to find to the east, that it could be faster if we found this river. It’s hundreds, if not a thousand miles of mountains and valleys between Winter Forest and Valoria on the east. This was shortly after the war when our planes and boats were in disrepair and supplies were short. We were desperate, and Seraphine, she well. She said halfway through the mountains was a river that she believed linked up with the river that runs through Valoria, through Mirage. She believed she could find it, it would be faster than traveling through the forest by land.”

“How did she know there was a river?” I asked. I remembered Seraphine, and she was always a strange woman. Not in a bad way, but in a way that made me wonder if she knew and saw things most people couldn’t. My parents trusted her.

“It didn’t matter to me at the time. It sounded plausible. There were warriors that wanted to go, begged in fact. So, your mother and I gave our permission.”

“I remember them leaving for the expedition. I wanted to go with them.”

“I remember that,” Dad said with a sober smile, “You fought us for weeks.”

That had only been ten or eleven at the time. The expedition had opened up a whole new world for me and the other boys in Winter Forest. We were the generation born after the war, confined to one place while the adults cleaned up the mess. Suddenly, the small bubble we had been living in had opened up, and we wanted out.

“What killed them?” I asked, moving towards the entrance of the cave.

“Exposure, starvation. I’m not sure. I’d need to inspect them closer, but for now, we need to find a place to rest and start a fire. Are you hungry?”

I shook my head. We had been eating rabbits and ground squirrels for a week and had stayed well fed, thankfully.

“Should we bury them,”

“No,” Dad said quickly, grabbing the packs as we exited the cave, “We shouldn’t disturb them. I’ll do my best to identify them so I can give their families closure when we return to Winter Forest, but that’s all. I don’t like the feeling here.”

I agreed with that; the cave felt somewhat electric and overwhelming. I was thankful to leave, walking a quarter mile away over the boulders until we reached another short cliff where a cave opening was hidden between a pile of boulders.

Dad went inside first, lighting matches as he examined the shallow cave. We could fit inside if we crouched and sat, but we couldn’t stand. “We’ll sleep here,” Dad said, “look for something, anything, we can burn. We can’t have a fire inside, but we can have one burning at the entrance for light, at least.”

I went out to find kindling, careful of the uneven ground as I moved through the boulders. They were black rocks, uneven. Likely volcanic.

That would explain the strange landscape and cave systems.

I looked back towards the caves, seeing the top of Dad’s head disappear as he made his way back to the final resting place of the expedition. I felt a pang of regret as I watched him, wondering what he might be thinking.

Ethan, the Alpha King. Ethan, the mate of the White Queen. Ethan, who likely felt he had failed to save his daughter, who lost his hold on the castle of Drogomor. Whose nephew, the Alpha of Drogomor, was missing or dead.

I grabbed a few handfuls of dry grass and rose, tucking them under my arm. Then I heard a whooshing sound and turned to it, right as something hit me hard, square in the face.

I staggered backward, my vision blurring as I tried to maintain my balance. I could taste blood, feel it streaming from my nose.

“What,”

Another whoosh, another blow, this time to my shoulder. I fell to my knees, pain radiating through my body as I heard Dad's voice lifted in alarm.

Then everything went black.

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'Rowan, wake up!' Dad's voice crackled over the mind-link. I blinked, sitting bolt upright and immediately regretting it. I grimaced, groaning as I brought my hands to my face. I tried to blink, to open my eyes, but they were watering incessantly, blurring my vision. 'Count to three!' Dad said over the link.

'I can't see

Suddenly my nose crunched, the sound of it echoing around wherever we were. I almost screamed, but Dad's hand flew over my mouth in warning. I sputtered blood as he took his hand away. I could feel him next to me, and after a minute or two, my vision began to clear, and I could see through the slits of my eyes that we were in a room, something carved out of the rock, lit by torches.

'Your eyes are swollen, Rowan. I just realigned your nose.'

'Yeah, I can f*cking feel it-'I said, reaching up to touch my swollen eyes.

'Don't say a word out loud, do you understand?

'Yeah,' I replied, touching my nose next. "Where are we?"

'I don't know. They put a sack over my head. But we were brought down somewhere, likely in a cave.'

I heard the sound of keys jingling, then a door opened up. I turned to the noise, Dad gripping my arm and positioned himself in front of me as someone stepped into the room.

*Alpha King Ethan, we've been expecting you," came a voice, deep and slightly raspy. The unfamiliar man spoke in a strange accent, something I had never heard before.

"Who are you? What pack is this?" Dad said sharply, rising to his feet.

“Pack Lycenna. Come, the Alpha is expecting you... both.” I felt the man’s eyes on me, and Dad stiffened beside me, his hand resting on the top of my head.

“He’s injured. The Alpha can come to me.”

A laugh rang out, echoing through the room. “No, he can’t, so you will come. You can leave the boy, but I guarantee something else will fetch him, and they won’t be gentle.”

Can you walk?’ Dad asked over mind-like.

‘Yeah, it’s just my face that hurts. F*cking b*stards.’

He helped me to my feet, guiding me as we followed the man out of the room. I could barely see a thing, only the light coming off the lanterns as we walked down a long, winding hallway.

I could hear noises, voices, drifting down the hallway, the sound getting louder as we stepped into a large, circular room. A hush came over the voices as we continued to walk, eventually standing in the center of the room.

I could feel dozens of eyes on me. I blinked, the swelling giving way and allowing me a clearer view of where we were.

An elderly man sat at a table in front of us, the table carved out of stone. He was ancient, the skin hanging from his face and his bald head gleaming in the amber light of the torches along the walls.

But Dad was looking past him at a man standing against the wall. He wasn’t much younger than Dad himself. Tall, with shaggy red hair, he looked at us like he recognized us. He was staring right at us, his mouth slightly ajar.

‘Who is that? He looks familiar,

‘Otto.’ Dad answered quickly, turning his head away from Otto as he looked back at the Alpha. I could feel the adrenaline coursing through his fingers as he continued to grip my arm. ‘Don’t say a word.’

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 275

Chapter 55: An Old Friend

Ethan

Don't look at me. I will come to you.' Otto's voice filled my head as I tried to maintain eye contact with the Alpha of Lycenna. I nodded, once, in response to Otto, who I knew was looking right at us.

Otto had been one of my best and most loyal warriors. He had also been a friend, someone who Rosalie and I had loved dearly. Otto had been a large part of our lives when Maeve and Rowan were young. He had asked to be part of the expedition team, and I had let him. I blamed myself for what I believed was his death.

And now? What the hell was he doing here?

"Alpha King," said the Alpha of Lycenna, dipping his chin to his chest in a short, dramatic bow. I furrowed my brow, narrowing my eyes at the man as he reached for a goblet, his hand shaking as he brought it to his mouth.

"You laid hands on my son," I said, my voice booming.

"Ah, yes. A misunderstanding, I'm afraid. You are our guests, here. Welcome to Lycenna. I am Alpha Julien, and these are my elders," he motioned towards the group of men who flanked him on either side. The word elder seemed a strange choice, given that the men were much younger than him. I swallowed, looking them over, steeling my expression as they stared back.

"If we are guests," I began, "Then we will be leaving,"

"So soon? I'm afraid that's impossible at the moment. A storm, you see."

"We can fend for ourselves,"

"Come, sit with my pack. Eat and rest. Tomorrow morning, we will give you what you need to continue your journey north."

'Don't drink the wine,' Otto said over the mind-link, his voice harboring a plea. I fought the urge to look at him, keeping my eyes forward and locked on the Alpha instead.

Two men stepped up beside Rowan and I, ushering us to another table where we were seated, plates of food set in front of us.

The conversations around us began again. Every once in a while, someone craned their neck to watch us. Rowan chewed his food slowly, his jaw obviously bothering him. I made a mental note to ask about the warriors who had so roughly apprehended us. I would beat the living hell out of the one who had dared to hurt my son.

Rowan reached for his mug of wine, and I reached out, taking it from him. He blinked, looking up from his plate. I shook my head, slowly, pretending to roll my neck and shoulders to hide the motion. He licked his lips, mouth dry, and continued to pick at his food

I took a moment to look around, noticing everyone seemed to look alike here. There were two types of people; one group had dark hair, pale skin, and dark eyes. They were slightly shorter than their lighter counterparts who had tawny hair and darker skin, their eyes a strange, deep gray. I felt a chill run up my spine as I scanned the room.

Something wasn't right about this place. Not at all. How had I never known about Lycenna? Or that a pack lived in this unreachable place?

"I'll show you to your room," said a man who had appeared behind Rowan. He grabbed Rowan by the shoulders, pulling him to standing. I jumped to my feet, clasping the man by the shoulder and shoving him away.

"Keep your hands off of him!" I growled, taking Rowan by the arm. The man held his hands up in surrender. I glanced up at the Alpha, who was still seated, his beady black eyes watching me with interest.

We followed the man out of the room, and I stole a glance back to where Otto had been standing, but he was gone.

Rowan was sitting up against the pillows, his head leaning back against the bed frame as I paced the room, trying to come up with our next move..

We were obviously underground in some kind of cave system that had elongated with rooms carved out of the rock.

I didn't have a single good feeling about this place or its people. Especially the Alpha, who had been watching me throughout our dinner. I hadn't liked the way he looked at me, but especially at Rowan, a strange, unreadable glimmer in his eyes as he looked at my son.

The door swung open then snapped shut again, breaking me from my musings. Otto turned the lock, clicking it into place before crossing the room and throwing his arms around me. I squeezed him, fighting back tears as I clapped his back.

"Where the f*ck have you been?"

"It's a long story, Alpha," he replied, letting go and taking a step back, his gaze turning towards Rowan. "I've missed so much." He shook his head, looking Rowan up and down with a sober smile on his face. "You were just a boy when I saw you last."

Rowan nodded, but suspicion was lining his face as he looked at Otto.

"How is Rosalie? And Maeve?"

"That can wait," I said in a hushed voice, grabbing Otto by the shoulders to face him toward me, "How did you end up here? What happened to the expedition?"

"You need to get out of here. Come with me. I don't have time to explain!" He pulled on my jacket, but I pushed him away, squaring my shoulders.

"Tell me, Otto. What happened? It's been fifteen years!"

Otto looked at me helplessly, fear moving through his face as he swallowed. He shook his head, looking down at the floor.

"We had stopped to rest in one of the caves for a few days. The weather was bad, it rained constantly. The river wasn't where Seraphine thought it would be. We could hear landslides in the distance and knew we needed to stay put until the weather turned. Seraphine, she... she argued with us about stopping. She was terrified. No one understood why."

"Seraphine-is she here? With you?" I said, my voice sounding desperate.

Otto opened his mouth, then shut again, his eyes misting over. “No, she she died a few years ago. I was with her.”

I nodded, a fresh wave of loss washing over me. I stole a glance at Rowan, who was looking down at his hands resting in his lap. Poor Gemma.

“How did she die?” I asked.

“She was sick. They let me be with her while she passed away. She... said you’d come. She held out hope.”

I swallowed hard, feeling like an utter failure. We had, of course, sent scouts out to find the expedition, but the mountains were too vast, and their tracks had disappeared in the wind, the rain, and the snow.

“I lost the others. I left the cave site with Seraphine. She was trying to leave on her own. We were ambushed. I never saw the rest of the party again.”

“We found the cave,” Rowan said behind me, his voice soft and steady, “Found the bodies.”

“Could they have been killed from exposure-“ I began, but Otto cut me off.

“No, they were deliberately killed. I didn’t know it then, but now...” He paused, inhaling deeply, “Listen. This pack is different, okay? Not different in a good way. They don’t worship the Moon Goddess. They worship Lycaon, you know the fable? Anyway, some of them have special powers and they-”

“What? They don’t worship the Moon Goddess?” Rowan said, shocked.

“Go on,” I said tersely.

“They... they selectively breed here, Alpha. They choose mates based on the probability certain powers will be passed down,”

“That’s insane, Otto. You must be mistaken-”

“They’re going to kill you, Alpha. But they need Rowan.”

“Need me for what?” Rowan quipped, sitting straight up in bed.

“They’re looking for your mate. Her mother was born here.”

“Hanna?” Rowan narrowed his eyes, “Why? How would they even know about her?”

“I don’t know for sure, but somehow, they know all about the two of you. They
Hint. they think you’ll bring her here. They mean to use you as bait to draw her
in

Slow down, Otto!” i demanded, my head beginning to spin, “We’re getting out of here, okay? All three of us. Do you know how to get out? Is there an entrance,”

Otto nodded, then shook his head, looking down at his feet. “I can get you out. People have escaped before. But I can’t go with you.”

Why not?” Rowan said, swinging his feet out of bed.

Otto looked up at me, pain behind his eyes. “I have a wife. We have five children. I can’t leave them behind.”

“Five children?” Rowan whispered in disbelief.

*They will come with us, of course—”

You don’t understand what I’m trying to tell you, Alpha. These people...they are dangerous. This religion they follow, their rules, their customs. I can barely make sense of it and I’ve been here for almost two decades. Shelly, my wife, she was born here. She’s ingrained in this culture. She wouldn’t leave if she wanted to, and sometimes she does. She won’t-”

Im not taking no for an answer, Otto. Bring her, and your children. We’re getting out of here tonight. If we have to physically carry her out of here over our backs then we will. Be prepared to leave in an hour.”

Otto looked from me to Rowan, a silent plea behind his eyes.

‘I am still your Alpha. I refuse to leave my own behind. That includes your family, Otto. You can explain things to me when we’re on the move. For now, tell me what we need to do to get out of here.”

*The children are young-”

“Well carry them. There will be four adults between us, including your wife.” Rowan said quickly.

“I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if we got caught, Alpha. You don’t know what they do to people here. My children-”

“Don’t worry about that. I am your Alpha. I am the Alpha King. I am demanding this

of you, Otto. Prepare your family. You’re going home.”

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 276

Chapter 56: Escape

Rowan

Shelly turned to look at me over her shoulder, the baby nestled against her chest in a sling as we walked toward the light beaming through an opening in the cave. She narrowed her eyes, squinting into the darkness behind me.

“It’s fine,” I whispered, trying not to disturb the sleeping toddler strapped to my back. “I haven’t heard them in a long time.”

Shelly swallowed, glancing back into the darkness once more before turning her head toward the light, her long black hair fluttering against her waist.

Our group was a strange sight. Otto was in the lead with his two eldest children, both boys, one ten or so, and the other only roughly a year younger but nearly equal in height. Abel was the eldest and was the spitting image of Otto, while Timothy was a startling mix of both of his parents, inheriting his father’s reddish hair and his mother’s dark brown eyes. Dad had been in charge of their daughter, a little girl named Farrah who had insisted on walking, but her six-year-old legs quickly tired, and now Dad was walking with her on his hip, her head lolling on his shoulder as she slept.

Shelly held their newest baby, an infant who couldn’t have been more than three or four months old, a quiet baby named Henry.

And I was strapped to Otis, their two-year-old hellion who had spent a good part of the last four hours plucking hairs out of the back of my head as I

carried him in a sling tied to my back. He had finally fallen asleep, and I wanted to keep it that way.

It had been shockingly easy to leave the underground network of tunnels the Pack Lycenna lived in. It was a small pack, with a population that couldn't have been more than sixty or so people at the most. We had simply left our room and met up with Otto's family, following Otto's lead as we walked through the impossible maze of man-made tunnels to the more challenging and narrow network of naturally occurring tunnels that had several openings to the forest above.

There had been a period when we were being followed. Our biggest challenge was

keeping the children quiet as we tried to navigate the uneven ground, having to stop periodically to lift the children over rocks and encourage the ones who were walking to squeeze through the tight, darkened pockets of rock that opened up into wider, more open tunnels.

Eventually, we lost the warriors who were on our tail, and now we walked into the light with a communal feeling of ease. Even Shelly, who hadn't said a single word to any of us, had breathed a sigh of relief as we finally exited the cave system, stepping out into the light of midday, sheltered by huge spruce trees.

"How many miles was that, do you think?" I heard Dad say ahead of me, shifting the dead weight of the sleeping Farrah to his other hip.

"Close to forty, if my estimations are correct." Otto patted his sons on the head as he spoke to Dad further.

Forty miles? That sounded almost impossible. We had been walking for at least a day, if not a day and a half, only stopping to rest for an hour or two at a time. I felt sorry for the kids.

"Ouch!" I hissed, turning my head back to look at Otis, who was driving his knee into my back

"Down!" he said, smacking me cleanly on the cheek.

Shelly turned to look at us, giving Otis a look that only a mother can give, and the little guy settled down momentarily, murmuring to himself as he shifted his weight against my back

The party continued into the forest for several more miles until the sun began to set through the trees. Dad and Otto finally allowed us to set up a modest camp, prohibiting a fire but allowing us to finally sit down and rest, eating whatever dried food Shelly and Otto had managed to pack.

Darkness fell over the forest as Shelly put the kids to bed, the four children nestled together beneath a single blanket to keep warm. She kept the baby against her chest as she leaned against the tree, running her fingers through their hair as she whispered songs to them.

Otto was sitting with me and Dad, his back against one of the spruce trees, We were acutely aware of the night noises in the forest, our heads turning to any sound

at dusk to belong to those

Something fell off to me

Why did no one stop us from leaving?" I asked Otto. Otto was carving a point into a long, skinny tree branch he had found on the forest floor as I spoke, and he rested the branch on his knee as he looked up at me to answer

"The Alpha only has so many warriors to spare. They likely know exactly where we are, anyway."

"You seem so casual about that fact," Dad said, giving Otto a quizzical glance.

Otto shrugged, continuing to carve the branch with his pocket knife. "People have been leaving Lycenna for a long time. Alpha Julien is weak, and he demands a lot from his people. Those who stay follow blindly. It's a cult, really. And they will continue to follow us until we reach Winter Forest tomorrow. Mark my words."

A strange expression crossed over Dad's face, his body stiffening. Was Otto playing both sides?

"I'm not leading them to Winter Forest, if that's what you're thinking," Otto breathed, fatigue lining his features.

“Why didn’t you leave Lycenna before now?” Dad’s voice had an air of suspicion to it, and I knew he was feeling as uncomfortable as I was. Our escape hadn’t been an escape at all. It had been easy. Far too easy.

“Shelly couldn’t leave. She had sisters-” He paused, glancing quickly over his shoulder to the tree where his wife and children were resting, all of them sleeping soundly. He turned back to us, grinding his teeth. “It’s awful, Alpha, what they do to women there. I don’t even want to say it.”

“Well, you need to. I need to know what to expect from them if they ever attempt to attack Winter Forest.”

Otto sighed, placing his pointed branch on the ground at his feet. “Like I said, they selectively breed in Lycenna. They believe some people carry the powers of Lycaon, and that it’s inherited. There are barely any children in Lycenna now. They... well, Shelly and I had healthy children because we’re not... related.”

“Wait a minute,” Dad said, his face twisted in shock and disgust.

“I wisdi 11 wasn’t true, Alpha Butilis Intoshreeding is the sick, I wisiod norm in lycemia It has been for centuries They’re looking for something called a Dream Lancer but there hasn’t been one bom for at least two generations. They believe it’ san inhented power, and uh, matching family members will produce a wolf with the powers they seck”

I looked at Dad, the forest floor seeming to fall from beneath my feet. Dad looked back at me, a knowing expression flickering across his face.

Hanna. Of course.

“My mate-“I began, but Dad held up his hand to stop me from continuing.

“You didn’t leave because Shelly felt she needed to stay behind?”

“Yes, I... Shelly was given to me when I pledged my loyalty to the Alpha. I felt I didn’t have a choice. Seraphine was dead. I wasn’t confident I could find my way through the caves on my own. People die in there all the time. It’s so easy to get lost. And then... we fell in love, I guess you could say. We had Abel then Tim a year later. So on, and so forth.” He motioned toward his huge family, a tight smile touching the corner of his mouth. “Shelly had younger

sisters, two of them. Women are currency in Lycenna. We did everything we could to hang on to them, using the need for help with our children as an excuse. Eliza died first; she had been sick since she was a girl, with some kind of degenerative disease, from what I could tell, but Lycenna doesn't believe in medicine and science like we do. Then Marian died, but she took her own life when she was given to one of Shelly's cousins,"

"I don't need to know more," Ethan said quickly, swallowing.

I felt bile rise in my own throat, blinking rapidly as I tried to clear the gruesome thoughts trying to surface in my mind.

"We couldn't let Farrah... we just couldn't. There was already talk of it among the elders. She's the only girl born in this generation. Shelly agreed when I asked if we could leave, finally. We had to. I believe they let us go because they need to one, know how to get out of the caves heading north, and two—" Otto turned his attention to me, his eyes wide.

"Because they want Hanna," I said, finishing his sentence. Otto nodded gravely, shaking his head. "But why?"

"I don't know. I only know what the elders have said about it. I learned... I learned too much." He winced, looking suddenly miserable. "Is Gayla still alive?"

Dad shook his head, sucking in his lower lip. "She died ten years ago. We were with her. Everyone was with her. She didn't go alone."

"Good. That's... that's really comforting." Otto swallowed hard, nodding his head as he blinked back tears.

We had told Otto about Maeve and the fall of Drogomor. He had in turn told us about the vision Gayla had during Maeve's first birthday party. It was shocking, really, how much Gayla's vision had lined up with the events that happened shortly after Maeve turned ten. That was when the Alpha of Red Lakes had brought his children and wife to visit Winter Forest. When Aaron had fallen from the tree. When Aaron's mother had cursed Maeve, saying she would never come into her powers.

And now look at us. Gayla had only seen black in vision. What could that possibly mean for us now?

“Your mate is a Dream Dancer, isn’t she?” Otto asked.

I nodded, leaning back against the tree. “She is. She doesn’t know what it means to be one, though. None of us do.”

“Where was she born? Surely not Lycenna,”

“Her mother must be from there, right Rowan? It’s the only plausible explanation,” Dad said, turning to me.

“No, there’s another pack that can harness the powers of Lycaon, but they’re far south. I don’t know where. Seraphine told me about it when she was sick. ... I had a hard time understanding her story, though. It didn’t seem real. She called this place a utopia. But I can’t remember the name. It was a brief conversation. She was more worried about something... something she had given to Gemma, a necklace,” Otto said.

“A necklace?” The Gemma I knew rarely wore jewelry. I don’t think I had ever seen her wear a necklace.

Otto yawned loudly, stuttering as he tried to continue. Dad stopped him, holding out his hand and shaking his head. “We all need to rest. I’ll take the first watch while you

and Rowan sleep. Rowan, I’ll wake you in three hours.”

I *nodded*, crossing my arms over my chest. I already knew I was going to have a hard time sleeping after everything Otto had told us.

“How much farther to Winter Forest, do you think?” Otto said as he rose, meaning to go lay next to his family.

“We’ll be there by tomorrow night. I’ll recognize this place. I think I know where we are from...” He trailed off, looking through the trees.

This was where he had battled during the last war.

I closed my eyes, pushing Otto’s awful story out of my mind.

‘Hanna?’ said over the mind-link, wondering if were close enough to connect.

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 277

Chapter 57 : *Madalynn's Son*

Maeve- The Persephone

I climbed the stairs to the upper deck, wrapping a loosely woven shawl over my shoulders as I stepped into the light of the moon. Una and her people had supplied us aplenty, ensuring we had food, tools, and clothing for our journey.

Our journey through the Southern Pass.

I was thankful to have more feminine clothing to choose from now, soft silks and flowing fabrics that I favored over the tight britches and poofy, oversized shirts worn by the crew.

But Troy was back in his usual garb, the white of his shirt glistening in the moonlight reflecting off the water. He was sitting against a crate, his head bent over a large sketchbook and a pencil in his hand. He looked up as I approached, a soft smile touching his lips. "I thought you were asleep?" he said as I moved in on him.

"I wasn't tired," I said honestly, sitting down next to him and looking out over the deck. The sails were tied in place, wrapped snuggling around the masts as the engines purred beneath us. The Persephone was moving as silent as a ghost through the water, too far south to be picked up on the radars of other ships in the Isles of Denali to the north. *We* were safe. For now.

I pulled my shawl tighter, slightly chilled by the soft breeze. It had been warm in our room, but the side of the bed where I expected Troy to be sleeping was cold to the touch when I woke from a restless half-slumber. *We* hadn't had a single private moment together in the last twenty-four hours. Myla, Pete, and I had reached the beach camp just as the skiffs were coming back to pick up the last of the tents. Troy was already on board the Persephone, pouring over maps on the main deck with Keaton by his side, the two of them trapped in a long, drawn-out conversation about the plan, whatever that would be.

Thad hoped he'd at least come to bed with me once the Persephone breached the southern channel and we began to rock in open water. But he wasn't there when I woke up

I bit my lip as I sat beside him, a question weighing heavily on my mind.

"Did Una tell you?" I breathed, nerves tightening my throat as I spoke.

“That you’re pregnant?” he replied, his voice steady and calm. “Yes, she... she did.” He was silent for the space of a breath, looking over at me with an unreadable expression in his eyes.

“I’m sorry, Troy!” I exclaimed, unable to stop myself. I had had a nagging, overwhelming sense that he would be upset, maybe even angry at the news. He looked shocked though, setting his sketchbook down and taking my hand, knitting his fingers in mine.

“Why the hell are you apologizing?”

“Because I know... I know this wasn’t what you wanted to happen!”

He gaped at me, his brows knitting into a confused frown. “Maeve-”

“You were never my breeder!”

“Well, uh. Obviously, I was.” He gave me a sly smile, rubbing the palm of my hand with his thumb. “We weren’t doing much to... not get pregnant.”

I swallowed, surprised by his reaction. I remembered our conversation during our lakeside dinner in Dianny, where the strange powers of the valley seemed to pull us together, making us less reserved with our words. Four boys? He had repeated. His eyes had been full of happiness.

“It’s twins,” I said weakly, hoping I was interpreting his reaction to my pregnancy correctly.

“Oh, Goddess. What are we going to do?!” he laughed, eyes twinkling in the moonlight

“Are you happy?” | asked.

“I’m nervous, Maeve. If I’m being honest.” He swallowed, looking suddenly serious. “They technically wouldn’t be... mine. That’s how this works.”

“No!” I gripped his hand. “No. That was different-”

“Are you sure? These kids are the heirs to Drogomor. Even if Aaron had actually

been your breeder-”

“Drogomor is gone.”

“Maeve, I’m nothing. I tricked you, remember?”

“What do you mean you’re nothing?”

He pulled his knees into his chest, letting go of my hand as he wrapped his arms around his legs.

“I didn’t have parents growing up, remember?” He paused, pursing his lips.

“What does that have to do with—”

“It would be better for them to be raised without me. I don’t know how to be a dad.” His words sliced through the air, and my worst fear seemed to be coming true. He didn’t want this

“Troy, 1-” I felt like I was going to cry.

“It’s not that I don’t want them. I do. I just... they deserve more than I can give them. What am I, Maeve? An orphan, a beach rat, a f*cking pirate. Some father, right-”

“Troy, please!” The emotion in my voice was too loud, too harsh to hide. He looked up at me, seeing the fear and desperation behind my eyes.

“Oh, Goddess, Maeve. I didn’t mean I wouldn’t-” He reached out, pulling me to him, resting his chin on the top of my head as I laid my head on his chest. We sat quietly for a moment, holding each other. “I never knew my mother,” he said quietly.

“Is she the woman in your old sketchbook? The one you had to leave behind in Drogomor?”

“Yes. At least, I think so. It’s not even my memory, Maeve. It was my father’s description of her. He said...” He trailed off, clearing his throat. “She died shortly after I was born. Executed, I believe.”

“Executed?” I said, shock evident in my voice.

“Yeah, uh, for war crimes.”

“By who?” I asked, but the answer was suddenly clear. I straightened up, looking

Tio Tov’s eyes as the answer passed silently between us. “How do you not hate

me?

*it wasn’t your parents, not directly”

“But

I never knew the full story. I’ll never know, and I’m okay with that,” he said firmly.

“You’re Madalynn’s child?” I asked, even though I knew the answer. It must have been Madalynn. I had only heard her name in passing once when I was eavesdropping on my parents as a child. It has been said harshly, with disdain.

“I never knew her name, not until Romero said it. I thought he had been my paternal grandfather, but he was her father.”

“And your dad? Who was he?”

Troy bit his lower lip.

“His name was Behar. I didn’t actually know his name until he dropped me off at Damian’s court when I was four or five. Four, I believe. My last memory of him was.. |-” He exhaled, shaking his head, the memory obviously troubling him. “I followed him back to the beach. I was crying for him. He kept pushing me away. He ran from me, and I couldn’t keep up with him. I never saw him again, and I couldn’t find my way back to Damian’s palace on Avondale. I just... wandered. I don’t have many memories until I eventually joined Keaton’s group of street kids.”

The image he painted was one of the most painful things I had ever imagined, of him, more of a toddler than a little boy, trying desperately to keep up with his father as his father was trying to abandon him. I couldn’t bear it. Tears welled in my eyes as he continued.

“My memories before that are too fleeting and fragmented to remember fully. I remember a small house near the beach. I remember being alone often. I remember a meal he used to make all the time, homemade noodles with a red sauce made from the tomatoes he grew in the garden. I can still smell it. But I don’t remember his voice anymore. I don’t remember his face.”

“Troy... I’m so sorry.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry about,” he said, shaking the memory away. “I was fine. I

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“You were just a child, Troy!”

He looked at me, eyes full of unreadable emotions. He reached out and stroked my cheek, pressing his forehead against mine so the tips of our noses were touching. “What kind of father could I be to these kids, Maeve? How would I know-”

I took his face between my hands, kissing him. It was a long, easy kiss, something / had wanted to do for a while. “We’ll be there for them, both of us. We have to.” | said, a silent plea trembling in my voice. “Regardless of how we feel about each other.”

“How we feel about each other?” He pulled away, giving me a confused expression. “What do you mean?”

“When you find your mate”

“My mate?” He laughed, throwing his head back. “Who do you think you are to me, *Maeve*?”

“1–”Tinhaled, steeling my expression. “Not your mate!”

“Why? Because of the curse? You really believe that still? Look at what you were able to do in the circle of stones, Maeve. If you cursed from coming into your powers, I doubt you have been able to... do whatever that was.”

I swallowed, considering.

“We are mates. I am certain,”

“Well, I’m not!” I said sharply. “And I refuse to hold you hostage, Troy. Despite how feel. Despite how much I... how much-“| rose to my feet, my mind reeling. “I can do this myself. I just wanted to make sure you knew. I wanted-I really wanted, but I can’t-“| stuttered, beginning to lose my grip.

It would kill me if I turned twenty-one and couldn’t feel him, feel the bond that was supposed to bind us together, tether us for eternity. Because then I would know he belonged to someone else, and I couldn’t live with the fact that he was now trapped with me, bound by nothing but a responsibility to our children.

He stood, clasping me by the upper arms and shaking me. “I love you, Maeve. I have

loved you since the very second I saw *you*, and nothing, and I mean nothing, is going to stop me from loving you until the day I die.” He placed his hand on my stomach, his fingers spread wide. I felt a ripple of electricity pass between us as he looked up at me, desperate that I heed his words. “And I would lay down my life for these kids. Our kids. I am their father, and I will never, ever let them forget it. I love you. I love-”

I kissed him, tears streaming down my face as he wrapped his arms around me.

“I love you,” I whispered, the words barely audible. But I had said them.

We stood in each other embrace beneath the stars, letting ourselves just... feel, for a moment. Eventually, he pulled away, taking my hand as he led me to the railing to look out over the endless, calm water.

“What do we do now?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Well, you’re not going to be working in the kitchen anymore. Just rest. We’ll need it.”

“For what? The babies aren’t due for months,”

“For the journey ahead, of course. In a lot of different ways.” He laughed quietly, his eyes moving upward to the stars.

“How *are* we going to find the tomb without the map?” I asked, my hands resting on the railing.

Troy dug into his pocket, pulling out a compass. But it wasn't his usual compass; this one was ancient, and the brass was faded to a green patina. He held it out to me. I took it, opening it up and watching the dial. It stayed in a locked course as I moved it around. Strange, I thought; it must be broken.

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"Una gave it to me. It was Lycaon's, or so she says. We didn't need the map after all. It was just one piece of the puzzle."

"This is getting super weird, right?" I said, having to laugh at the sheer ridiculousness of it all. We were in a living, breathing odyssey, a fairytale brought to life against our will.

"It'll get weirder, I'm sure," he replied, taking back the compass as I handed it to him. "Una said something else, Maeve. But I'm not sure what it means. Romero said the

same thing to me when I was in the castle."

"Oh?"

"They said you're the key."

"The key to what?"

Troy bit the inside of his cheek, lost in momentary contemplation. "You're the key to the tomb."

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 278

Chapter 58 : Fated Babe

Maeve

Cleo felt over my belly, finding a spot just below my navel where my stomach went suddenly limp, as though the muscles I had there just up and disappeared. I looked down, slightly concerned.

"It's just your ligaments loosening up," she said with a smile, unrolling a length of measuring tape and laying it vertically over my skin. "You're going to start feeling

something like... being snapped with a rubber band, every once in a while, around your waist.”

“Yeah, I’ve felt that a few times,” I said, watching as she measured my stomach. I definitely wasn’t showing yet, but I did feel a little softer, looser. I had tried to explain it to Troy, trying to find a word for the way my body felt. What had he called it? Limp noodle?

Ah, yes. My bones felt like overcooked pasta. I was suddenly clumsy, dizzy, and extremely fatigued. I felt so out of sorts, like my mind and body were no longer connecting. And when I brought it up to Cleo, she had simply nodded, telling me it was all totally and completely normal.

“You’re measuring ahead, but I expected that, carrying twins and all,” Cleo said, rolling the tape around her finger and putting it back into the bag Una had given her, which was full of practically everything needed to tend to a pregnancy and deliver a baby. She pulled out a stethoscope next, placing it on my skin to listen to whatever lay beneath.

“Can you hear them yet?” I asked. She put the stethoscope away and gently prodded my stomach. It was amazing to watch her work. She had delivered so many children during the course of her career. There was no one else I trusted with my pregnancy more than Cleo.

She was also the only person even remotely qualified to deliver the babies, especially given the fact that we were traveling into the unknown.

—

—

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“Not very well, but I guarantee you, they’re there. Both of them. You’re probably two

—

months along, I’d say.”

“When will she start getting round?” Myla was standing in the corner of the room! shared with Troy, watching us with her arms crossed over her chest. She looked a little uncomfortable.

“I already feel round,” I said as I pulled my shirt down. I struggled suddenly to sit upright, needing Cleo’s assistance as a wave of dizziness washed over me.

“You’re likely a little anemic, Maeve. I’ll let Olly know. You’ll need more iron in your diet.”

“Your boobs are huge,” Myla said curtly, and both Cleo and I turned to her.

“Are you okay,” I said, but Myla was already out the door, slamming it shut behind her. “What’s her problem?”

Cleo sighed deeply as she put her tools back in the bag, running her fingers along the smooth leather. “Her biological mother died in childbirth, remember?”

“Oh,” I replied, feeling incredibly insensitive. I blushed, drawing my knees into my chest. “I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking,”

“It’s not you, honey. She’s concerned.”

“But... I’ll be fine, won’t I?”

Cleo gave me a soft smile, nodding. “You’ll be fine. I wouldn’t let anything happen to you. I wouldn’t let anything happen to her, either.”

“Is that what she’s upset about?”

Cleo folded her hands in her lap as she sat down on the edge of the bed, looking over at me with a look that told me whatever was said between us was not, under any circumstances, to be repeated.

“Myla asked me recently how to prevent a pregnancy from occurring. She is terrified of it, Maeve. She may not have known her mother, but she was orphaned moments after she was born. That would make anyone have second thoughts.”

“She was talking about having ten children with Keaton when we were in Dianny-”

“And maybe someday she will, but for now...” Cleo trailed off, picking at a patchwork

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quilt “She’s not ready. And I don’t think Keaton is, either.”

“What did you tell her to do?” I asked, genuinely curious. I hadn’t ever even considered it given that I was in a situation where I was supposed to get pregnant instead of not

*Not have sex, for one. But that’s not plausible after meeting your mate, is it?” Cleo laughed, shaking her head.

“Cleo?” I asked, taking advantage of our moment alone to ask her something I had never known. “Did you ever find your mate?”

Cleo’s smile faded, her eyes shimmering suddenly with a distant, somber memory.

“I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry-”

“It’s alright, darling. I just haven’t talked about her in a long time.” Cleo’s expression underwent a series of expressions as she got lost in her memories. After a moment she looked up at me, the corner of her mouth twitching with the shadow of a smile. “I did find my mate. Her name was Olivia.”

“How old were you when you found her?”

“Oh, twenty-two, I believe. So young,” She laughed gently, looking down at her hands. “She was beautiful, truly. I know everyone thinks their mates are beautiful but Liv was just... I was enraptured by her. She was the daughter of a lesser Alpha from a small pack in the West. I was training under the midwife in her village when we met and we... ran away together.”

“You did?” I leaned in, wanting to know more.

“We had to. She was being married off. Her father would have never approved of our relationship. We thought we’d have a chance if we fled to the Isles, but...” She trailed off, knitting her brow, “We were caught. I was arrested,”

“Arrested?” I was shocked.

“For kidnapping her, if you can believe that.” Cleo rolled her eyes, shrugging her shoulders

“What happened then?”

“I didn’t see her again for many years. Twenty years... the longest years of my life. By

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that point, I had trained to be a midwife. I ended up setting up a practice in Mirage. That’s when-“She exhaled deeply, her eyes misting with tears. She met my eyes, shaking her head. “I’ve never told Myla.”

“Told her what?”

Cleo bit her lip, looking suddenly so young. Cleo was a beautiful woman already, but at that moment, I could picture what she would have looked like in her youth.

“I was... I was working in Mirage. A man came to me; he said his wife was struggling in labor. When he brought her inside, I thought-I just...” A single tear rolled down her cheek. She looked away from me, settling her gaze on a random spot on the far wall. “I hadn’t seen her in so long. And then, there she was, right in front of me! I couldn’t believe it! But she was so sick, so far gone by that point.” She blinked several times, trying to steel her expression as she turned back to me.

“Before I met Olivia, she had been betrothed to another Alpha. Once he found out about us, he wanted nothing to do with her. Her father believed she shamed their family, so he sold her. And she spent twenty years.... I didn’t know. Oh, Goddess, I regret not knowing every day. And I see her in Myla. They are so alike. I thank the Moon Goddess daily for bringing us together, one last time, even though she died in my arms while Myla cried in the bassinet next to the bed. I couldn’t...” She swallowed, her eyes willing me to understand.

“You raised Myla-”

“She was mine the second she came into the world,” Cleo said firmly, nodding her head as though she were answering an unsaid question. “She was meant to be ours. When Olivia died, the man never came back. I never saw or heard from him again. I don’t know if Liv had other children. I don’t know anything about how she spent the last twenty years of her life. I blamed myself for her death for a long, long time. But I never, ever resented Myla for it. Liv gave her to me, I truly believe that. It was fate that I was the one that terrible, disgusting man came to when Liv was dying from a hemorrhage. I never told Myla about him. Never. And I never want to.”

“Why haven’t you told her the truth?” I asked, my heart shattering into pieces for

Cleo

She only shook her head, inhaling and exhaling with effort. “She told me Myla’s name as she was dying. She told me Myla was a gift, and to love her as much as we

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had loved each other. I was in pain, Maeve. I didn’t know, and still don’t know, how to explain this kind of grief to Myla.”

“She would understand,” i said, although part of me understood Cleo’s secrecy. Myla had a flair for the dramatics, and though that wasn’t a good excuse for Cleo not telling her about this part of her past, I could definitely see Myla responding out of nothing but raw, unfiltered emotion. She would, at least for a time, be angry with Cleo

“I can’t lose them both,” Cleo said, her voice trembling as she reached into the pocket of her apron, pulling out the little navy–blue purse she always carried. She reached inside and handed me a folded-up piece of paper, thin with frayed edges. I opened it, gently, unable to hide the gasp that escaped my lips as I gazed down at a sepia-tone photograph.

Olivia and Myla looked nearly identical. They had the same tightly curled black hair and rich umber skin. Their eyes were the same shape, large and fanned with thick lashes. I wished I could see the color of Olivia’s eyes in the photo,

or the sharpness of her jaw and nose, but the photo was faded, some details lost in time.

“They are the loves of my life,” Cleo said, her voice threaded with sadness. “I’d be lying if I said the idea of Myla finding her mate and possibly having a child in the near future didn’t make me fearful. I can’t imagine losing them both.

“Cleo!” I exclaimed, taking her hands in mine, “You’re a midwife, for Goddess’s sake. The best one around, I’d say.”

She snorted with mirth, giving me a side-eyed look. “I’m the only one around,” she said, her mouth twitching into a smile.

“Has she seen this picture?”

“Yes. We had it framed and resting on the bookshelf in the living room. It’s the only thing I grabbed when we had to flee the house.”

“You should tell her, Cleo. Tell her everything. She deserves to know.”

“I know. I know I should. And I will when the time is right.”

Cleo stood as I handed the picture back to her. She gave me a soft, knowing smile.

I missed my own mother desperately, especially now that I was pregnant.
Mom

75.46%

wouldn’t know about any of it yet; not the babies, not Troy, not my incredible and ridiculous quest. I wondered if she knew I was still alive, and the thought of my parents worrying about me made me suddenly sick to my stomach.

I laid back against the bed, resting my hands on my stomach.

I wondered, briefly, what I would tell the twins about how I met their father.

And then, I wondered what Troy would tell them if anything were to happen to me.

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Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 279

Chapter 59: The Rings

Rosalie

I watched them come up the drive, their fingers intertwined as Randy, one of our warriors, dragged two trunks behind him. Georgia was pointing up to the house, leaning into Talon as she talked, her dark hair falling long across her shoulders. For a moment, she looked like Maeve, although much smaller and darker, but her facial expressions were so similar to that of Ethan and our daughter.

Strong genes, I thought with a little laugh, crossing my arms over my chest as I turned to walk back into the house from my perch on the deck.

I heard Randy in the lower stairway leading up from the large garage. He was asking if he could take their things up to the White Queen's castle, which was now used mostly for community events and housed the secondary school for the older children of Winter Forest, the old school too small for the sudden boom in population.

CD

"No, I want to stay here! Talon, how cute is this place? It's cuter every time I see it. See, this is what we should have built—"Georgia's voice was drifting up the stairs as I walked out of the living room and into the front hallway.

"Rosalie!" Georgia cried, throwing her arms around me as she walked around the corner of the stairwell.

"Hey!" I said, squeezing her. Talon came up behind her, nodding his typical, hands-off hello.

I was expecting them, knowing full well Georgia would want to stay at our house other than the more immaculate rooms at the White Queen's castle just up the bluff. She always stayed in the house, even if that meant sleeping on the couch with Talon on the floor beside her. The guest room upstairs was already taken up by Kacidra and Hanna, so Gretchen, our housekeeper, and I had made up Maeve's room for them upstairs.

I had seen them a few months ago when Ethan and I traveled to Mirage to drop Maeve off. They had been making their yearly trip to Mirage at the time,

planning it so we could all be together for an entire week, enjoying the company of family before we went our separate ways again.

lill

Our reunions had always been met with joy.

But this time was different.

Georgia's initial elation faded within moments of their arrival, and with good reason. I was hiding my panic at the fact that the seaplane had returned without Ethan and Rowan, deciding to not mention it when their journey was inevitably brought up. Ethan had gone to find Maeve and Ernest, after all. Now all four of them were missing.

I left Georgia and Talon to settle in, touching Gretchen lightly on the shoulder as she passed me in the hallway with a tray of cookies and lemonade for our guests.

"I'm going to go get some fresh air," I said quietly, my eyes telling Gretchen I needed a moment to think, to panic, to let myself be totally overwhelmed. She nodded sweetly like she always did.

"The girls went for a walk. Miss Hanna wasn't feeling well, I'm afraid."

"Where did they go?" I asked, trying to keep my voice level. Was Hanna having another one of her visions?

"Miss Kacidra said they were going to do a loop around the castle grounds but would be back in time for supper."

I gave her a quick smile and nod in reply, trying not to run down the hallway toward the backdoor that led out into the slightly overgrown back lawn.

The gate, situated right behind Rowan and Maeve's old wooden playset, was open when I approached, leading out into the trail systems that wove through the woods to the grounds of the castle. I closed the gate behind me as I left our yard, breaking into a run as I was swallowed by the towering spruce trees and spindly birch that covered the grounds.

The castle was quiet now. School wasn't in session, and it was the weekend, so none of the warriors were running drills on the open field with a dirt track

around it. I spotted the girls right away, Kacidra's blonde hair falling over her face as she held Hanna's head in her hands.

Hanna was lying flat on her back in the field, her clothes wet and hanging from her body as she convulsed.

"Something's wrong this time!" Kacidra cried, her face stained with tears as she saw me approach.

I fell to my knees beside them, taking Hanna's face in my hands.

"Wake up, sweetheart!" I begged, gently patting her cheeks.

Hanna's eyes were moving side to side under her eyelids, her chest heaving with effort, lifting her back off the ground.

"She's never trembled like this before!" Kacidra cried, grabbing her sister's hand and squeezing it tightly.

It went on like this for several minutes, the ground around us growing damp and the grass glistening with water, soaking our knees.

"S-S-S-" Hanna choked, water spilling from her mouth.

I struggled to turn her head to the side. She was fighting me, the muscles of her neck rigid as she fought whatever demon was on the other side of the dream.

"Find the door, sweetheart," I said loudly, bending close to her ear.

She'd had two episodes since Rowan left, but neither had lasted more than a few minutes. One had happened overnight, Kacidra appearing at my bedside to ask where I kept the spare sheets, her nightgown soaked on one side and clinging to her skin where the water had traveled to her side of the bed. Hanna didn't talk much, but I was able to get her alone long enough to have her explain her dreams. All she said was she had to look for a way out; otherwise, she'd dream again, and again, and again with growing frequency

This looked like much more than a dream, however.

"S-S," she sputtered.

“What is she trying to say?” I said, looking up at Kacidra, who shook her head frantically.

“I don’t know-”

“Soren?”

I froze. Hanna suddenly went limp, her eyes opening up wide but unseeing. Her right arm straightened, lifting into the air with her hand in a fist. She unfurled her fingers, one by one.

“This was missing,” Hanna said, her voice calm and reassuring. Then her arm fell, and she gasped.

Chapter 59 The Rings

I looked at Kacidra, her brow knitted in concern as Hanna began to wake up, spitting water as she rolled onto her side. I patted her back, making shushing sounds like I was trying to soothe an infant.

“Kacidra,” I said firmly. “Do you know who Soren is?”

Kacidra shook her head, looking back down at Hanna and smoothing a lock of hair from her face. I sucked in my lower lip, biting it as I watched the sisters. All I could do was wait for Hanna to be lucid enough to tell me what she saw. And she would.

“I saw...” Hanna blinked, sitting in nothing but a bra and underwear on the field as Kacidra and I passed her cotton dress back and forth, taking turns twisting up the fabric and wringing out the water. Hanna shivered, her teeth chattering as we worked, but the sun was drying her skin and her hair, the black strands beginning to curl along her back as they dried. “I saw two rings. But one of them was in the water. Someone was missing it.”

“Rings? You didn’t dream about the building again?” Kacidra asked, shaking out the half-dried dress and laying it flat on the grass to let the sun do the rest of the work.

I shrugged out of my light denim jacket, draping it over her shoulders. She looked up at me, a look of gratitude in her eyes.

“No. I was far away. The water was cold, and then it was warm. And then I was stuck, and everything was... light.”

It didn't make sense, but I kept my lips closed, waiting for her to continue.

“Maeve is alright. She has to make a choice. I gave her the ring. The red ring. But she needs the necklace.”

I gaped at her, my brow furrowed. “What ring? What necklace?” Maeve never wore jewelry. She had never shown interest in it, never once asking to rummage through my jewelry box....

“Oh, my Goddess. Soren's rings.” I said aloud, the memory of the gift bounding into view as the pieces of the puzzle came together. He had given rings to me and Ethan long ago, one with a clear, brilliant stone set on a dainty gold band and another large ring with a red stone, a dense stone, something that looked like it had been carved out of the side of a mountain and polished to a crimson gleam. Ethan never wore it, saying something to the effect of it made his finger itch, but Maeve had been obsessed with it.

She had lost it one day tripping over the rocks on the beach at low tide. She had been desperate to find it, running along the surf as the tide came in. Ethan had to pick her up and carry her home, Maeve kicking and screaming the entire way. She would have been five or six at the time.

“Did you see him? Soren?” I asked, kneeling in front of Hanna.

She looked at me quizzically. “Who?”

“You said Soren when you were dreaming,” I said, gripping the grass to stop myself from wringing my hands together. We hadn't seen or heard from Soren in years.

“I don't know. Someone was there, but it wasn't a man.” Hanna bit her lip. “Seraphine has something Maeve needs.”

I shook my head. I had told Hanna about Seraphine, and about Gayla. Seraphine, the ever-mysterious adventurer, and Gayla, a powerful seer. They were both gone, but Hanna talked about Seraphine endlessly. She had wanted to see pictures, to listen to stories about her. She had once said that Seraphine was the “Keeper,” but when asked about what that meant, Hanna couldn't remember why she had said it.

“What was Maeve doing in your dream?” I asked, thankful to know Maeve was alive but desperate for information about her whereabouts.

“She was in the temple of the White Queen. She was returning something that was lost.”

“The ring,”

“No, not the ring. The necklace. But it wasn’t enough. A piece was missing,”

Suddenly, Hanna turned her head in the direction of the house, her body going totally still. Kacidra and I followed her gaze. The trees between the castle grounds and the house were moving in the breeze, but that was it.

“They’re back,” she said under her breath as she stood, grabbing the dress on her way up and letting my jacket fall to the grass. She pulled the dress over her head, the last confused remnants of her dream slipped away as she snapped back to reality. Knowing Hanna was like knowing two totally different people. At one moment she was normal, kind and shy. And the next, she was simply... gone. A ghost. A shell of a person.

“Who?” Kacidra said, but Hanna was already halfway across the field.

“Rowan!” Hanna said over her shoulder, a wide smile on her face.

Rowan

I saw her standing at the edge of the tree line, her dress lifting in the breeze around her knees. She was smiling at me, and the sight sent a warm rush through my core. She looked different, somewhat more at peace.

Thad reservations about leaving so soon after we came from Red Lakes. I didn’t know Hanna very well at the time, and honestly, I still didn’t, but seeing her now cemented what I knew to be true. She was my mate. I loved her. She was the most beautiful thing Thad ever seen in my life.

And she was changed. The bond between us was more defined. I could feel the pull, smell the sweet, home-like scent of her more clearly.

Whatever had happened in my absence, well, I would probably have to thank my mom for it.

Speaking of my mom...

“What the hell happened!” Mom said, her voice lifted in mingled elation and annoyance. Dad was walking behind me, keeping in step with Otto and Shelly. Mom’s jaw dropped in utter disbelief as Otto approached, her gaze moving from Otto, to his wife, and then to each of their many children.

It was a beautiful thing to witness, Mom seeing Otto again for the first time in fifteen years. But it was ruined for me in an instant as Otis ran up behind me, yelling “Tag!” as he smacked me firmly in the back of the knee with a large stick.

My knee gave way and I almost lost my balance, right in front of Hanna, of course.

“We have a lot to discuss,” Dad said briskly to Mom.

I could tell he was hiding his true feelings in front of Otto. I could see the look of longing in his eyes as he wrapped his hands around her, pulling her into his chest. I was too young to remember their early relationship. I had only known them as loving and committed. But I knew they had struggled, even though they were mates.

I glanced at Hanna, who was standing next to Kacidra, and met her gaze.

Maybe we had a chance, her and I.

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Chapter 60: She’s Alive

Rosalie

Georgia gripped the coffee mug in her hands, her dark hair disheveled and falling around her face. I had never seen her like this, so tired. So out of sorts. I didn’t even ask if she wanted more coffee as I refilled her mug, returning the carafe to the coffee maker and reaching into an upper cabinet, pushing aside several boxes of tea and grasping the bottle of whiskey Ethan kept tucked away.

poured a liberal shot of it into her coffee, glancing into her downcast eyes.

I could hear Ethan and Talon talking in Ethan's office, their voices carrying down the hallway and into the kitchen. Above my head, I imagine Kacindra, Hanna, and Rowan speaking about the same manner of things, their heads bent close together as they whispered their grievances in the guest room, the door only slightly ajar.

"There hasn't been this many people in this house, ever," I said, breaking the silence.

Georgia glanced up at me, a brief, somber smile twitching into view in the corner of her mouth.

"We never had this; you know... a family home, something cozy, something just for us." She sipped her coffee, letting it linger in her mouth for a moment before swallowing.

"That's why Ethan built it," I replied, sipping my own coffee, now tepid. "He wanted Rowan and Maeve to have something you never had."

"Doesn't that seem backward to you?" Georgia said with a little laugh. "That Ethan, Talon, and I all grew up in palaces, princes and princesses? The kind of people you would think would have it all?"

"Fairy tales," I laughed, shaking my head.

"We thought we had had our happy ending, didn't we?" Georgia sniffed, turning her mug in a circle.

I reached out, hesitating before placing my hand over hers. What could I possibly say to her?

I heard Ethan's footsteps in the hallway and looked up as he entered the kitchen. He looked at me, his eyes telling me everything I needed to know.

"Come, Georgia. Let's go get some rest." Talon entered the kitchen behind Ethan, his eyes lined with dark circles. He placed his hand on Georgia's shoulder, gripping it.

Ethan and I watched as Georgia dissolved into a puddle of tears while Talon held her, looking away as his eyes misted with the same watery substance.

Ethan blinked, working his jaw as he stared at them, then turned his gaze back to me.

go for a walk with me?’ he asked over the mind-link, his eyes boring into

nodded, sliding the bottle of whiskey across the kitchen island toward Talon, who nodded his thanks without looking

followed Ethan back through the house, stopping at the foot of the stairs to look up into the second -floor hallway, where the soft voices of the young ones were floating down through the air.

even Hanna. They were home. They were

you say to Talon?” I asked as we walked down the driveway toward

told him the truth,” Ethan said simply, pushing the gate open and holding it for

truth is that?” I took long strides to keep up with him as we walked down the long gravel road leading to the village, my breath

veered off the road, taking our well beaten trail through the trees. “That we cannot go back to Mirage to search

walking, shocked. I hadn’t expected

you say that to

US

supposed to lie to them?” He was staring me down, his eyes shining with

is their son,

“I already went, Rosalie. I failed-”

not fail! You got our son to safety and

discovered everything we knew about this place, our origins... your powers...” He trailed off, looking through the sparse trees toward the bluff that hang over the inlet, a special, personal space only for

Rowan hadn't been with you, you would have stayed behind. I know you would have. You did what you needed to do." I was growing desperate. That decades of practice being able to peer into Ethan's mind, to read his body language and make an estimated guess at what was going on within the recesses of his brain. But Ethan had regressed, coming home from his journey looking, and acting so much like the onery, secluded, and brooding man he was when I first met him back when I was just his breeder. Not his wife. "Look at me,

.

He shook his head, tucking his hands into his pockets. "Talon will go to Valoria. I could see it behind his eyes. He'll take Georgia. They'll die there. I told **him so.**"

h

"*Don't act* like you wouldn't go to the ends of the Earth for our children too, Ethan," I bit out, shaking *with frustration*

"**I did**, and what do I have to show for it? Maeve is not with us, is she? I didn't bring her home. I didn't-" He turned away as his eyes filled with tears, refusing to let me see them fall. I rushed to him, throwing my arms around him and pressing my cheek into his back as he began to fall apart. "I'm not the man I once **was,**"

"That is not true."

"*There is* going to be another war, Rosalie. A war where our children will have to fight."

"There will always be wars-"

"**And** Maeve is gone, Goddess knows where," **he said.**

"She's alive, Ethan."

He turned to me, his eyes narrowing. "You can't know that for sure."

"Hanna!" | exclaimed, practically shaking him. "I tried to *tell you!*"

"*What about* her?" But suddenly his face changed, a look of understanding blurring *his features.*

“*She can* see Maeve in her dreams. Maeve is alive, and she’s well. She’s going to come home, Ethan.” I left out the more concerning aspects of what Hanna had told me about her recent episodes, of course.

Shouts sounded through the trees behind us, the usually sleepy village erupting into life. Ethan looked down at me skeptically, then took my hand, leading me toward the bluff overlooking **the inlet**.

There was a small ship bobbing in the water in the distance, an unrecognizable vessel. We peered at it, Ethan narrowing his eyes as the boat neared the breakwater, turning toward the *port*.

“*Is it the Alpha of Red Lakes?*” I asked, shielding my eyes from the sun with my hand to get a *better view*.

didn’t answer. He was watching the warriors rush out onto the dock, waving their hands as the boat turned too sharply and struck the edge of

hell is driving that thing?” Ethan

‘We’d better go down-’

didn’t move, his body going rigid as a figure appeared on the deck of the boat. A

he whispered, as though he were talking to

sprinting as fast as my legs could move, leaping over tree roots and sliding on the gravel as I reached the road. I could hear Ethan behind me, catching up to me and passing me in an instant. But he didn’t turn to the village; he had turned back to the house, stopping short of the gated driveway.

bellowed for Georgia and Talon, who appeared on the deck overlooking the driveway in a matter of seconds. I was panting, my hair falling loose from my braid as Ethan motioned for them to come, to follow. Georgia was shaking her head, her face wet with tears. But Talon nodded, gripping his wife

and escorting her back into

was close behind Ethan as they ran down the road toward the village. Georgia was walking, barely moving as she shuffled her feet behind me. I didn’t say a word, not wanting to give her false hope in the event Ethan and had been

the time the inlet came into view again, Georgia and I were far behind Ethan and Talon, their figures blurred by the distance as they turned to run to the

please!" | begged, turning around to take her by the arm and physically pull her

"I want to go back!"

I really don't think you do," I coaxed, giving her arm

so much like Maeve at that moment. Maeve had the same pout, the same creases in her eyes when she was upset. It always broke my heart, and seeing Georgia so depressed made me want to hold her, sing to her, and run my fingertips along her back like I had done for Maeve so many times before. "Please, Georgia, we're

indignantly, then turned her shuffle into a quick step. I nodded approving, giving her an

didn't have very far to go before we heard Talon call out, his voice lifted in shock and

into view, and Georgia stopped, her mouth trembling as she watched the scene before us

she said weakly, taking a step forward while I stayed

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Chapter 61 : Face from the Past

Rosalie

It had been three days since Ernest and Gemma had arrived in Winter Forest. To say our lives hadn't been completely turned upside down by their appearance, and shocking revelations of what happened in Mirage, would be an understatement.

On top of all of that, Gemma was pregnant with Ernest's child. They were mates. Georgia had burst into tears when Ernest told her as such. Georgia had told us about her vision long ago, the same vision himself had seen in his youth that led him to believe he would never find his mate or have children.

The announcement had been met with shock and joy, but mostly shock. This changed things for everyone, especially Maeve. If Ethan and Ernest were able to recover Mi rage, Gemma would be Luna. Their child would be the heir, and there was no longer a need for a breeder.

And despite an initially warm welcome, both Gemma and Ernest had been holding up in the small house Seraphine had built along the bluff overlooking the inlet, the door locked and the lights turned off.

They had been through hell and back. Whatever trauma they'd encountered on their journey, well, they weren't willing to talk to us about it yet.

But Ernest had supplied us with something from the destruction of Mirage. He had handed a large, worn-out leather sketchbook to Talon and Ethan before he escorted a wary and exhausted Gemma to Seraphine's old house. He had also given the flannel jacket Rowan and Maeve used to fight over, the flannel that was now confirmed to have been stolen away when Maeve left for Valoria, back to Rowan.

Rowan had been heartbroken. It was a sign that things with Maeve were not alright.

I was standing on the front deck, leaning on the railing and eavesdropping on the conversation taking place between Rowan, Ethan, and Talon. They were sitting in the wicker chairs around the outdoor table, scratching their heads over the incredibly detailed drawings and portraits in the sketchbook belonging to the man named Troy. A man, according to Ernest, who had been good. Someone even Ernest considered a friend.

How can that be?

"Wait a minute -" Talon had reached out to stop Rowan from turning a page. Talon stood, sketchbook in hand as he looked down at the page, holding the sketchbook at an angle to get a better view of the drawing in the light. "Do you know who this is, Ethan?"

Ethan peered at the page as Talon lowered the sketchbook, his brow knitted in concentration. I saw a flash of recognition in his eyes, then his head snapped in Talon's direction, his body nearly jumping out of his chair. "It's not

"That's Madalynn. I'm sure of it."

“Who?” Rowan looked down at the page just as I started moving forward, unable to stop my

self.

she was, her facial features blurred as if drawn from some distant, forgotten memory or someone else’s description. Her face shape was spot on, her hair an identical shade of brown that I remembered vividly. I felt sick to my stomach suddenly, having to turn away before I met

hadn’t thought about Madalynn

sudden, painful realization of the reasoning for her sudden appearance swept over me as I slowly turned back to Ethan, who was looking right at me. “Her child?” I asked in a barely audible

was a boy. That’s all I know.” Ethan swallowed hard, looking down at the page once more before turning his head to look over the railing, his eyes lost in

was a time I wished for nothing more than Madalynn’s slow, painful death. But something had changed in me when I had Rowan, something only a mother can truly feel. When we found out about Madalynn’s pregnancy before she was put in prison, I was torn to shreds with guilt

Ethan to never tell me what happened to Madalynn and her child, and he never

Not until today.

is dead, Rosalie. Her child was safe.” Ethan crossed his arms over

happened to him?” I asked, my voice tight with

don’t rightfully know. Only that he was given to someone for safekeeping,” he

to Behar?” I asked, my stomach beginning to turn as I looked down at the painting of Madalynn on the table

could have been, but Behar allegedly died in the war; at least that was what Madalynn had told everyone. The boy would’ve been orphaned fully if that was true. Who knows where he ended up,” said

he ended up in Valoria,” Rowan said, his voice cutting through the air as he turned the pages of the notebook and settled his gaze on the open page. We all looked down, and a somber silence paused

It was Maeve, drawn with such talent that I felt like I was looking at a photograph of her. She was smiling, laughing, her eyes shining on the page.

It had been drawn with great care.

With love.

*I reached up to wipe my eyes, turning away from the group as I walked a few paces **away**.*

“*Is this man...*” came Talon’s voice **behind me**.

“*It’s probable* this man is Madalynn and Behar’s son, yes.” Ethan’s voice was steady, as though the idea of our daughter in the hands of a man sharing the same blood as the very woman who had caused so much grief and chaos was nothing to scoff at.

“**Ernest** said he was a good man, a friend” Rowan cut in, but was swiftly hushed by **Talon**.

“**Ernest also** said Troy was masquerading as Maeve’s breeder to get close to Romero on Damian’s orders,” Ethan said, running his tongue along his bottom lip as he spoke.

“Whoever he is—”Talon tried to say.

“*Will you* listen to me?!” Rowan exclaimed, standing from his seat and leaning over the table to snatch the sketchbook out of Ethan’s hands. Ethan looked shocked, anger beginning to bubble behind his eyes.

“Rowan-“| began.

“**What good** would come out of chasing this man?” Rowan looked from Ethan to Talon, eyes flaming similar to Ethan’s. “Ernest believed this Troy guy. He really did. Ernest said Troy was the one who warned them Poldesse was invading. He said Troy was the one who got Maeve out of the castle-”

“*Ernest told* us a lot of other things too, Rowan!” Ethan snapped, his patience waning.

three men were shouting, talking over each other so rapidly that I couldn't make out the rest of the conversation. I bit the inside of my cheek, shaking my head as I watched them, their voices flamed by hurt

but Maeve was home and safe. We finally knew the details about what had happened in

so caught up in the fact that a strange, unfamiliar man was likely with Maeve, even though Ernest had explained the situation in

one seemed to care about what he had said happened to Gemma and Ernest that night, and the weeks that followed. No one but

thought Gemma had died. In fact, he was sure of it. He had stayed with her body in a clearing just outside of the castle grounds until dawn broke and the sky filled with an angry red, post-war sunrise. He left her lifeless body and returned to the castle, ready to meet his death, and found it totally and

single wolf remained inside the fortress. Even Romero's body had been removed from the tower. Ernest walked along the blood-stained hallways until he reached the spot where Gemma had been so violently attacked by Damian's wolves, just outside of

doors had been kicked in, revealing nothing but destruction as Ernest entered the rooms. He had found the sketchbook and the flannel during his time there, then left the castle as quickly as he had come, not seeing or hearing another person or wolf the

he returned to the clearing, he found Gemma sitting up. She had turned to look at him, blinking into the sun as she asked what had happened, and where she was. He had fallen to his knees, thinking she was a ghost, a figment of imagination. Or better yet, he was dead, and his suffering had

she came to him, touching him on the

that they hid, Ernest surveying the castle for several days. People began to come and go, soon taking up residence. He recognized the Luna of Greenbriar and several other nobles he had once thought of

But never Damian.

he had to leave Mirage. He needed to get Gemma to safety. And that meant getting her home to

5

listened to this story with a blank expression, his mouth occasionally twitching as Ernest recounted the more gory and sinister parts. Georgia had been too upset to even listen with her full attention, her eyes narrowing on Talon as she mouthed something to the effect of, "I told you he was too young to do this on

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Chapter 62: A Hazy Future

Rosalie

"Well, I wanted to name him Talon, of course. I was desperately in love with Talon back then, you know," Georgia said with a little laugh, giving Talon a teasing glance.

"I told you what would happen if you did," Talon cut in, bringing his glass of whiskey to his lips and smiling knowingly at his wife.

"I hate to admit that Talon was right," she laughed, tossing her hair over her shoulder. "But he was right. Every time I said Talon, they both looked right at me. It was rather confusing for both of them, honestly. We even tried calling him TJ for a while, for Talon Junior, but he refused to acknowledge that, even though he was just a toddler."

Ernest rolled his eyes, his arm draped over the back of Gemma's chair as Georgia continued.

"Well, Talon had given our son the middle name of Ernest, a beloved dead uncle on his side of the family," she paused, looking over at Talon to confirm this was correct. He shrugged, nodding. "Anyway, I started calling him Ernie, just thinking it was the cutest name I had ever heard, and it stuck."

"And now we call him Ernest," Talon finished, smiling softly at his son. Ernest pinkened at his father's loving gaze, and turned his head to Gemma.

"I will let you choose the name," he smiled down at her, his hand resting on her stomach, "As long as it's not Ernest."

“Oh, please,” Georgia laughed, waving her hand to dismiss his comment. “Ernest is a fine name. We could have named you Bartholomew-”

“Or Cornelius,” Ethan said with a wry smile.

“Or Richard,” Rowan said, leaning into the conversation.

“What’s wrong with the name Richard?” Kacidra cut in from the other end of the table.

“Well, it might have actually been a fine choice for you, Ernest. The nickname for it is Dick,” Rowan grunted as Ernest, who was seated directly across from him, kicked him in the shin.

“Nothing has changed,” Georgia murmured as she took a sip of her wine, giving me a sideways glance. I smiled, shaking my head as conversation erupted around me, the dining room feeling small, but warm, as we sat shoulder to shoulder around the modest-sized dining room table.

“Are Vicky and Paul coming?” Rowan asked, looking expectantly at Ethan. Ethan shrugged, but Talon shook his head, leaning forward to accept a bowl of green beans from Hanna.

“Vicky wants to be here, but Paul doesn’t want to risk it,” Talon said.

“I think that’s wise,” Ethan said soberly, giving me a look as I settled back against my chair.

They were right; we didn’t know what was going to happen here in the North. Vicky and Paul had settled in Finaldi, starting a family of their own. They had three daughters, none of them yet sixteen. I didn’t blame them for not wanting to bring their children to what could soon be considered a war zone if Damian made any further moves. We were, essentially, waiting for

war.

they name their daughters again? I can never remember.” Gemma was picking at her plate, slightly green around

pursed my lips as I watched her struggle for a moment, looking as though she was going to throw up before she was able to regain her composure. Gemma had been sick her entire pregnancy so far with little to no

there's Caroline, the eldest. And then Katerina is the middle... or is she the youngest?" Georgia looked over at me

is the youngest," I corrected. "Sarah is in the

that's right. The last we saw them they were talking about trying for a boy, if you can believe it," Georgia said as she brought her wine glass to her lips, looking around to make sure everyone had heard the

his brow. "Try again? Isn't that how Katerina came about? She's worse than Maeve was. What is she

"Nine!" Georgia replied, nodding in agreement.

said softly, gingerly sipping from a glass of water, "How did you come up with the name

ask Ethan that. He was the one who named her," I said with a

table turned to look at Ethan, who blanched at the attention, clearing his

thought it sounded nice with Rowan," he said simply, expecting that to be a good enough answer. "Why are you all still looking

also means she who rules," I said to Gemma, turning my head to glare teasingly at

that is fitting, isn't it? You know, I always wondered about her name. She's the only Maeve I've ever met," said Georgia with

names are you and Ernest thinking of, Gemma?" I asked, my chest tightening painfully at the thought of Maeve. I couldn't bear it. I needed to change the subject away from

I haven't given it much

been a little, uh, busy." Ernest gave Gemma a reassuring smile, his eyes seeming to tell her she was safe, reminding her she was

liked the name Eliza, or maybe Jennifer for a girl. I haven't even thought of names for

"*Rowan has a nice ring to it,*" Rowan said with a sly smile.

I nudged him with my elbow.

“You know, I had a dream a few weeks ago,” Gemma began. “I don’t really remember the dream, but I remember hearing someone say Tasia, and I thought it was a beautiful **word**.”

Hanna jumped to her feet, shaking the table as she did so. She swallowed, looking around before nodding once and bolting for the door. Rowan and Kacidra both began to rise, but I motioned for them to sit, rising from my seat and grabbing my plate as I mumbled excuses.

I could hear Ethan’s rapid stride behind me as I walked briskly down the hallway toward the den. I nearly tossed my plate on the counter as I hurried through the kitchen, the porcelain dish rattling against the counter as Ethan caught up to me, his hand reaching for my *shoulder*.

Hanna had run out the backdoor and was moving quickly through the backyard, her dress billowing out behind her.

“Rosalie!” Ethan growled, but I darted out of his grasp, jumping down the steps leading out of the den and into the yard. “ROSALIE!”

I sprinted across the grass, barely making it to Hanna before she reached the back gate leading into the woods. She stopped short of the gate, however, and I almost tackled her to the ground by accident as I slid to a stop. “What is wrong, Hanna?” I cried, taking her by the shoulders.

She tried to push away from me but stilled as Ethan came to my side. She cowered, looking down at her **feet**.

“This has been going on long enough,” Ethan said sharply, his tone biting enough to make me wince. “Whatever you’re seeing, whatever visions are plaguing you-”

“Something is wrong,” she said, her lower **lip quivering**.

“We need you to explain it to us, Hanna. We don’t understand.” I kept my voice as soft **as**

possible, fearful she’d collapse into the grass and have another one of her spells. “What do you see? We know you’ve seen Maeve. We know you’re able to see things that are lost, talk to people who have passed on-”

“No, I cannot do that,” she said firmly, shaking her head.

“**Why did** you leave the table so abruptly?” Ethan said, his tone softening.

Hanna looked up, her eyes watering. “Everyone thinks I’m crazy,” she said, her voice cracking with long **subdued anger**.

I was slightly taken aback by this, seeing for the first time the real, deep-rooted frustration that plagued her. She didn’t want these powers. She had no way to control them. She likely didn’t know how to interpret *them*.

Goddess. How I wished Gayla was here at this moment. We had buried her near the Temple of the White Queens over a decade ago and planted white roses over her grave. She had been a Seer. She would have known what to do to

dreaming of a building for years now,” Hanna began, her eyes still downcast. “I don’t know where it is, or what’s inside. I only know that I’m being pulled toward it. But I always get stuck; someone always pulls me back under. But after I met Rowan, I... I’ve been pulled to another place, like meeting him has begun a chain of events that I’m somehow linked to in the other

was listening patiently, but I saw his face change at the mention of another world outside of

a dream when Rowan first came to Red Lakes. Usually, my dreams were meaningless. I couldn’t control or manipulate them like my mother could. But this dream was different. Someone else was there with me, trying to communicate with me. I think she was... like

Dancer?” I asked, hoping she

believe so. It wasn’t until I dreamed of Maeve for the first time that I realized I wasn’t completely alone. Maeve was in deep, deep water. She was dying. She wasn’t supposed to be there. I got her to the surface of the water and a wave just... took her

don’t understand,” Ethan said, but I quickly shushed

then I saw the building again, this time much closer, like whatever I had done for Maeve had allowed me to close in on it. But it was loud and chaotic.

Before... I thought the building was the key to understanding my power. If I could only get to it, you know? Now, I'm not sure."

this other person look like?" I coaxed her to

seen them. I've only ever heard a woman singing, or a shadow approaching, or like... when I found Maeve, some type of phenomenon I can barely put

"What about Seraphine?" I asked.

She looked up at me, helplessly.

flashes of her sometimes, but she's much younger than the pictures you have. I don't know why. I don't know what it means when I

the rings? How did you know about them?" I asked, my heart beginning to beat rapidly in

ring was just... there. And somehow I knew it was what Maeve needed. I knew who the rings once belonged to. But... that dream is fragmented, Rosalie. I tried to write it

journal? The one Rowan and Kacidra were looking for-" Ethan realized his mistake the second the words fell from his mouth, and he quickly shut it, looking away from

sighed, reaching up to twirl a lock of her hair around her finger. I had seen Kacidra do the same thing several times, and for the first time, I realized how much alike the two women actually looked. Kacidra, powerless and fair. Hanna, dark and tormented by her mother's inheritance. Both plagued by the gift in

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Chapter 63: Catching up on the Past in the Pass

Troy

Three weeks had passed since we left Dianny, three weeks spent maneuvering through the shallow, unforgiving waters of the Southern Pass.

There came a point in time where we were forced to cut the engines, pulling the underwater propellers back into the ship so they wouldn't scrape against the seemingly endless reef that stretched for miles

It was a slow, arduous journey, sailing with only one sail opened to the wind to ensure we had time to catch any dangers lurking in the shallows

We passed a handful of shipwrecks, the rotting remains of both modern and ancient crafts sticking out of the shallow surf. It was an eerie place, even with the sun beating down on us and turning the water a clear, vivid turquoise. It would have been a tropical paradise if not for the ghosts whispering up from the water, telling us to turn around

I had been spending most of my days above deck, standing at the helm and sketching the landscape. There were no living maps of the southern pass. Even the radar in the engine room was running blindly plagued by constant errors. I meant to map the area, take note of every island and curve of the distant shore of the Southern Jungle we were following south. Pete had

taken up residence in the engine room, proving to have a knack for the technology that both – Keaton and I had struggled with for years. That had been Robbie's job

And Keaton was taking a sabbatical, in his own words, making me interim first captain of the *Persephone*. Keaton and Myla had been holed up in his stateroom day in and day out, no doubt enjoying some peace and privacy to know and explore each other.

But I wasn't alone, not ever. The crew was constantly above deck, their curiosity about the unfamiliar landscape too strong to keep them on task. Even Duck followed me around like a shadow, not used to being off land for so long. He was constantly getting his head stuck between the railing posts as he peered down at the water, but he did entertain the crew. They had been teaching the animal tricks and tossing a ball made of knotted linen back and forth across the deck, laughing as Duck jumped several feet in the air to try to catch it mid-flight, always missing.

And there was Maeve, who should have been resting but couldn't sit still for longer than a few minutes at a time. She was always fluttering about, bugging me with questions about the maps and sticking her legs through the railings as she watched the water below.

She was restless, and the long journey was proving to be too much for her mind to handle. She was starting to break down a bit, racked with guilt and worrying nonstop about her parents. Despite the danger involved, I was regretting not finding a way to get word to her family that she was safe, that she would come back to them.

And that made me wonder if I would go with her, back to Winter Forest. Surely, I would. I was the father of her children, of course. Would that be enough to stop Alpha King Ethan from wringing my neck and hanging me from whatever fortress he lived in to make an example out of me?

I blanched at the idea of meeting her father. Her mother sounded nice, sweet, and would probably be more welcoming. But Alpha King Ethan...

And then there was Rowan, her brother. I winced at the thought of meeting him. If he was anything like his sister, I was in for a world of hurt.

nothing was going to stop me from being with Maeve, from being a father to our

From making her my wife.

brought any of this up to her, of course. Our conversations had been lighthearted and easy since we began our journey south. We had been filling in the gaps that were left from the rushed beginnings of our relationship, making up for lost time, in a way.

out her favorite color was purple, and that her favorite food was rice. When I told her rice wasn't necessarily a food and more of a side, she protested, happy to argue her point for

hour. I found out she had never learned to ride a bike, that she hadn't learned to tie her shoes until she was almost ten years old, and that when she was twelve, she had attempted to run away, hell-bent on having a sweeping, romantic adventure like she had read about in one of her frilly romance novels she so desperately loved. Alpha King Ethan had actually packed her a lunch and sent her on her way, only for her to return several hours later vexed from a badly scraped knee and her lunch stolen

of all, I had confirmed what I already knew was true. Maeve was a menace. And she would likely harass me for the rest of my life as she had her parents and

me all about them. My favorite story was about a bat that she had spent the better part of four hours trying to catch with a fishing net. She did eventually catch the poor creature and took it inside their house. She tripped on the stairs, and the bat got loose, hiding in Rowan's room for several days before Ethan could finally flush

we fought about what to do with it," she said, rolling over in bed to look at me. "I wanted to keep

you did," I snorted, reaching out to tuck a lock of her hair behind her

it probably had a family, a wife and children. He eventually convinced me to give it

and let it go."

and on she went, telling me about her childhood and her wants, dreams, and desires. But when it came to telling her about myself, I had very little to add. What could I possibly say about my own parentless, unconventional childhood? I had had the responsibilities of a man by the time I turned seven. I had been working on ships and smuggling goods before I could even form rational

some miracle, I had the wherewithal to teach myself how to read and write. I was very good at math, which was how I ended up being the navigator for the Persephone and the keeper of all our financial records. I was handsome and a good actor, obviously. And I did, in fact, come from a royal bloodline. I had

But I was not like Maeve. And the further we traveled through the pass, and the past, the further felt from the life I thought we had a chance of having. She was a future Queen.

I barely even knew who I was.

But we were here, on this insane, unfathomable adventure together. I was thankful for that. But when it was **over?**

"And then he has to convince her brother-in-law that the wedding was, in fact, legitimate." Maeve was lying on her back, flipping through the pages of one of the novels I had found in Keaton's office. He had a very lengthy selection of romance novels tucked away in what should have been a dusty, unused corner. I would use this against him later, for sure.

“But didn’t the wedding already take *place*?”

“Yes, *but* they eloped the first time, but her family believed he forced her to marry *him*.”

“Oh,”

“And, I mean, he kind of did. But now they’re in love.”

“Sounds consensual and... romantic.”

She swatted me with the book, then placed it gently down on the nightstand, her fingertips dancing along the worn cover. “More romantic than maps, that’s for *sure*.”

“I read more than maps,” I laughed, rolling over to *face her*.

“Oh, you’re right. Astronomy is so romantic,” she said sarcastically, rolling her eyes.

“**If** you think that’s romantic, you should read my copy of The History of Celestial Mechanics and Differential **Calculus**.”

She blinked, her brow furrowing as she tried to make sense of what I just said. “Goddess, Rowan would love you,” she huffed, shaking her head.

I really doubted it.

I lay in silence for a moment, listening to the rain pattering against the window above the

you ever in love?” she asked, her voice sleepy and somewhat dreamlike. I arched my brow. “I mean, other than me.” “No, I haven’t been,” I said honestly, watching several different emotions dance across her face. “Have

paused, looking past me to the wall behind my back. “No, I don’t think

I teased, tucking my arm under

had crushes, I guess. I told you about one of

them? i couldn't help but laugh. Maeve was an absolute stunner. I was sure she was the beauty of Winter Forest during her time there. Of course, she had crushes, and I'm sure many a man was interested in her

few, but I didn't ever have a boyfriend, or anything like that." She sighed, still laying flat

She knitted her hands over her chest. "No one liked me back nearly as much as I

"Oh, how *come*?"

mom said I just hadn't found my person yet, and that it was okay. But Dad said it was my

laughed, unable to stop myself. I liked the picture she was painting of Ethan. There was a chance, although a thin one, that he would accept me based on the single fact that I was willingly putting up with his

she grumbled, reaching out to swat me with her hand, but I caught her wrist, knitting my fingers in hers and tucking her hand on the bed with mine. She took a breath, swallowing whatever sassy remark she had planned. "How many girlfriends have you

"None," I said casually.

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Chapter 64: Out of Nowhere

Maeve

"It's coming toward us from the east." Pete pointed to the radar screen, the green blotch inching toward the Persephone and then cutting backward as the image timed out. I couldn't make sense of the screen, but I looked up at Troy, who was watching it with intensity, his brow furrowed in confusion.

"Where the hell did it come from?" he said to himself, leaning toward the screen.

“What is it?” I asked, looking around the engine room. It was a small room with a wide window overlooking the water. Keaton was leaning against the far wall, his arms crossed over his chest.

“Weather,” he said shortly, running his tongue along his lower lip.

“Unusual weather,” Pete replied, glancing at Keaton before looking back at the screen. “There are no surrounding storm patterns, it’s just... there.”

“Well,” Keaton kicked off the wall, clapping his hands together. “I’ll warn the crew-” “We need to get the ship closer to shore,” Troy said as he turned to Keaton, his voice edged with seriousness.

“I don’t think we have time,” Pete said hurriedly, watching the green blob on the screen inch

closer to the dot that I assumed was the ship.

I walked toward the window, looking out over the white-capped sea. In the distance, I could see dark, swirling clouds. The clouds lit up as a jolt of electric blue ripped through them, followed by several faint booms of thunder.

“We ride it out, then,” Keaton said dramatically, giving Troy a cold look. Things hadn’t been the same between them since Robbie decided to stay behind in Dianny. Keaton left the room, and Troy turned to me, his hands on his hips.

“I’m staying with you,” I said firmly, tilting my chin.

“I’m not arguing with you about this. Go back to our room,”

“I can help above deck!”

“Doing what, exactly?” Troy was teetering on the edge of fury. His eyes narrowed on mine.

bit my lip, inhaling deeply as I stepped away from him, walking briskly to the door, I turned to him before exiting the room, looking over my shoulder. I had it in mind to remind him what had happened the last time I had been in our stateroom during a storm, but I swallowed back the words when I saw the expression on his

had no earthly idea what the radar screen was showing us, but whatever it was, it was making Troy and Pete very, very

pass. I could hear the rain beginning to pound the deck as I reached our room, and I climbed up onto the bed and stood to peer out of the circular window. The storm was funneling over the water, moving so quickly, I could see the wind manipulating the water as it drew near at an incredible

shit," I whispered, watching as the storm seemed to pull apart, the clouds suddenly racing toward us at an

barely had time to brace myself before the ship was thrown sideways. Everything in the room seemed to be suspended in the air for a split second as I fell onto the bed and gripped

I thought bitterly. I had almost lost Troy once. That had been

veered to its side once more, another violent swell shaking the room. I got up, stumbling around as I made my way to

hallway was empty. I knew Myla and Cleo would be holed up in Keaton's quarters. I heard shouting above my head on the deck and turned toward

"Goddess, help us."

the sails!" Troy bellowed over the wind. His hair was flying around his face as he spoke, his eyes wide and focused as he barked commands. "We're lying ahull, everyone brace!" A wave crashed over the railing, sending crates sliding across the deck in the wave's

was gripping the entrance to the lower levels of the ship, watching in awe as Troy took command. Keaton was at the helm, his voice lifted in shouts as the crewmen ran from one end of the boat to the other, drawing in

around, losing sight of Troy. Panicked, I stepped out onto the deck, looking side to

I screamed into the storm, looking up as the crew climbed the ratlines, tying the sails back. Troy was with them, his shirt billowing around him as he worked, the muscles in his forearms taunt as he yanked a rope into a

violent jerking motion of the ship ceased as the sails were brought in, and suddenly we were still, rocking in the waves as the storm spun over the top of

f*ck are you doing out here?” Troy called out to me, jumping down to the deck. He stalked over to where I was standing, the wind whipping his shirt open to reveal his chest. I felt a blush rise on my cheeks as he moved toward me, eyes blazing with anger. My mouth went dry. He was like a predator moving in on his

look I saw in his eyes made my stomach tighten with need, and a
through my body.

Oddly timed, I thought, just as his hand clasped around my arm and yanked me back into the stairwell.

“Go back to our room, right now!”

I opened my mouth to reply, but then stopped, bringing my hand up to shield my face from... **the sun?**

Troy turned around and let go of my arm, spinning around and looking up toward the sky where the clouds had parted, the sun shining down on *the deck*.

“What in the hell,” he said as the clouds spiraled away from us as quickly as they had come. The only sound was the waves lapping against the side of the ship as we rocked in the surf. Everyone was looking up in mingled shock and *awe*.

“Did everyone see that?” Keaton’s voice rang out through the silence.

The crewmen were stunned, glancing at each other. The men who had climbed the ratlines to draw in the sails hadn’t even been able to climb back down the lines before the storm **abruptly disappeared**.

Troy turned to me, his eyes shining with confusion as the last of the clouds disintegrated over **our heads**.

“Troy,” I said slowly, a strange, uncomfortable feeling washing me.

“What just happened?”

“I’ve never seen anything like that before,” Troy answered, reflexively taking my hand in his as we looked out over the water.

“*Maeve*, go check on Pete,” Keaton said, sounding every bit the captain and not in the snide, ridiculing way in which he usually spoke.

I acted immediately, letting go of Troy’s hand and disappearing into the darkened stairwell, my footsteps echoing on the stairs as I ran to the *engine room*.

Pete was standing in front of the radar screen, bent to grip the seat of the chair as he shook his head at the screen.

“**Pete**, are you okay?” I said, a little **too loudly**.

jumped, his hand over his heart as he turned around to face me. “I-I’m fine. I’m fine.

see it-”

deck.”

swallowed, shaking his head. “I’ve been... I’m new to this, you know? I’d only been Robbie’s apprentice for a few months. I thought... I just had a

I coaxed, a cold chill running up the length of my spine as I looked into Pete’s face. He was

a voice came over the radio during the storm, a woman’s voice. It was familiar, but I just couldn’t

“You mean, from another ship?”

it couldn’t have been. We’re totally alone out here. There’s nothing but us on the radar. I just...” He exhaled, tucking his hands in our pockets. “You’ll think I’ve lost my mind if I say it aloud,

Pete! That’s far from the truth,” I rested my hand on his shoulder as we turned to the wide window, looking out at the eerily calm water. “We’re all crazy after what we saw

it. Maeve. I got the same weird feeling I had the entire time I was in Dianny, like I was being... manipulated, in some way. I think... I think someone actually caused

is that possible?” I swallowed against the nervous lump forming in

any of what we've been through possible,

Tasia

falling to my knees as my lungs stretched to welcome a full, much-needed breath. Deacon moved toward me, his dark hair falling over his shoulders as he bent and wrapped his arm around me, hoisting me to

felt dizzy, the spell nearly bringing me to my knees again, but he caught me, holding me

done," I said weakly, shaking my head. "They're

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Chapter 65: This Is It

Troy

The landscape was totally changed from the lush greenery and long beaches we had been following for roughly a month. The shallows of the pass gave way to deeper water, allowing us to travel at a quicker speed, the engines working double-time as we sped forward into the unknown with the compass pointing straight ahead

It was a week before Maeve's birthday She had been moodier than usual as we neared it, knowing what it meant.

She would finally come into her powers She would feel that I was her mate

Or she wouldn't do either.

And as I watched her pacing across the deck of Persephone, her hair pulled up in a heavy, tangled heap of a bun on top of her head, and I wondered if she even wanted to come into her powers. Not knowing whether or not she was cursed had kept her stable distracted Now there was no way to ignore the truth, whatever that may be

"This is it," Keaton said, holding the compass out at arm's length "It's wanting us to go straight into that cove, to the west."

"I see it." I watched the horizon as the strange, sand covered plateau grew larger as we neared. We hadn't seen land in a week. Keaton tossed me the compass and left the upper deck, moving swiftly as he walked towards the doors leading to the lower levels of the boat. He would be telling Pete to continue west, no doubt. I felt my chest tighten as adrenaline prickled my fingertips.

This was it. We'd have at least one moonstone. And that would be one less stone Damian would have at his disposal.

"I feel strange." Maeve said as she appeared at my side, her face drawn with anxiety.

"It's going to be okay. We don't know what we're going to find, but we're the only ship out here. Maybe you should lie down for a while. Usually, she would fight me on this, but to my surprise she nodded, walking gingerly down the stairs with one arm cradling her swelling belly. I was shocked at how quickly her pregnancy was progressing. Her usually graceful movements had become strained and uneven. She was uncomfortable.

"We're going to make this quick," I said to myself under my breath, wanting nothing more than to turn this ship around to get her back to her parents. We only had a few months to make the journey to Winter Forest by ship before the ice began to form on the northern seas. We couldn't miss that window.

Days later, we made camp on the beach, the Persephone bobbing just off the shore. The water was deep here, the beach giving way to a steep drop-off instead.

Nothing was green as far as we could see. Everything was covered in coarse golden

desert, we realized, as a group of us men shifted and spent an hour running a wide berth around the camp, climbing to the top of the plateau to gaze out over the ocean behind us, and the rolling sand dunes on the other side of the plateau. No buildings. No trees. None of us picked up the scent of other people or wolves. We

at camp, we regrouped. Maeve and Myla wanted to take the compass and find the tomb as soon as possible, but Keaton dismissed the notion. We had been aboard the Persephone for a month straight, and we were wobbly on our

feet when we stepped out of the skiffs on the shore. We all needed rest. Those who could shift needed

most of all, we needed to scope out the area before we attempted entry into the

day passed before I finally decided to follow the compass once more. I turned it over and over in my hands while Maeve slept next to me under our tent, debating my next move. I worried, constantly, about everything these days, but especially about what would happen when we found the stone. I opened the compass and watched the dial. There was nothing else continue to follow it into

Maeve

was walking behind Pete as Troy beat through the thick, tangled brush ahead of us along what was once a pathway lined with what looked like cement pavers of some sort but were so old they crumbled into dust beneath

strange sand dunes had given way to brush, then oddly shaped gnarled bushes that took us down into a deep, ashen valley. We saw stone buildings in the distance where the valley began to green, the rough sand and stone giving way to moss and other

found a trail, and a road, an ancient one, a road that eventually led the three of us into the remains of a

is this place?" I wheezed, my hands on my knees as I bent over to catch my

had been a month since the strange storm had rocked the Persephone and then abruptly dissipated over our heads. I was roughly four months pregnant now and feeling it. I was out of breath all the time as the little pups nestled in my belly squirmed and boxed with each

told me to stay behind when he decided to leave our beach camp and follow the compass west on foot. I refused, knowing that he would need me if he came upon the temple. The crew of the Persephone was exhausted, and we were running low on supplies. We needed to find the moonstones and head back to civilization as quickly as we

“I don’t know. Whatever this is, well, it wasn’t on the map,” Troy replied, stooping down to run his fingertips over one of the pavers. “It’s an archaeological site” Pete said suddenly, and we both turned to *him*.

“How do you know?” Troy stood, brushing the dirt from his knees.

“Look around. See those tools? And there— Pete pointed in the distance where the little village

seemed to abruptly end, dropping off into a deep, **darkened hole**.

I glanced at Troy, the downy hair rising on my arms as I caught his eye. A dig site?

“What if someone already found the stone—” I began, but Troy turned away from me, stalking down the pathway until he reached the edge of the hole, looking down into its depths.

“Goddess,” he said, his voice catching.

Pete and I hurried to his side, looking down in shock as we tried to make sense of what we were seeing.

Another village, long buried, had been dug out of the sides of the hole that we gazed into. The ground sloped down at an easy decline and was littered with various excavation equipment. The site itself looked to be a city center of some kind, a square, with ornate columns lining the square and richly decorated tile covering the ground.

Troy took the compass out of his pocket and stretched out his arm, holding it over the site and flipping it open with his thumb. Pete and I leaned into him, watching the dial spin in a **tight circle**.

“This is it,” Troy said softly, closing the compass and turning to me. “Are **you ready?**”

“Sure,” I breathed, trying to steady my conflicting emotions as I began to follow Troy down into the dig site, my chest tightening with apprehension.

“Holy shit,” Pete said behind me as we entered the square, looking around in awe. *Several tunnels*

dug between the columns with rafters holding sections from caving in. Most of the + tunnels were caved in, however, and we only had one option when it came to moving deeper

the dig site.

walked ahead of us, peering into the tunnel's

think it goes that far. It's damp, I think there must be water on the other side. Do either of you have a light?" Pete glanced at us over his shoulder, his face etched with

a small flashlight out of the inner pocket of his jacket and tossed it to Pete. It was starting to rain now, the sky a deep gray over the top of our heads as Troy glanced at me, reaching out to take my hand. "We can go

we do this now. We have to." I swallowed my fear. What if we came to the end of the tunnel and there was nothing? What if the entrance to Lycan's tomb was buried under several feet of dirt and rocks like the rest of the

to be okay." Troy smiled, his eyes twinkling with reassurance as I let him guide me into the tunnel, the light of Pete's flashlight leading the way.

my birthday present? A tour of an underground, secret, ancient city?" I snorted, stepping gingerly over abandoned excavating equipment as we walked further into the

his tongue, gently squeezing my hand. "I'll give you your birthday present when it's your actual birthday," he said, a smile evident in his

my mom celebrates our birthdays for an entire

that's what you are," he

Well, I am a princess."

couldn't see him, but I could sense the smile that must have twitched across his face. Pete was silent as we continued to walk, stopping on occasion to warn us of any debris we needed to step around

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 286

Chapter 66: The Tomb of Lycaon

Maeve

Damian was not what I was expecting. He was an older man, tall and lean. He was probably not much older than my own father, but was significantly gray, his eyes framed by wire-rimmed

glasses. He looked more like a kind old schoolteacher than the super-villain of my nightmares, but based on Troy's body language I realized there was much more to the man than I could gather based on a single glance.

Damian was standing, rocking on heels, and watching us. Pete was lying on the ground nearby, unconscious, and another unfamiliar man of a size that rivaled Robbie was leaning against one of the dead trees, his arms crossed over his chest.

"What are we waiting for?" Damian said in a casual, almost friendly voice.

Troy didn't move; he was still as a statue, his focus on Damian.

"How are you here?" Troy finally said, his voice edged with fury and confusion. Damian arched his brow, giving Troy an incredulous look.

"I made some new friends," Damian smiled, shrugging as he took a single step forward, craning his neck to look around Troy to catch a glimpse of me. "Ah, would you look at that? The rumors are true She does look like Ethan."

"We're leaving,"

"And going where exactly, Troy? I owe you; you know. When I first got word about the level of your intimacy with the princess, well, I thought it would cause me nothing but grief. But you're here now, with her. This will all be over quite soon, and you can have your prize-

"Prize?" I asked, looking up at Troy.

His shoulders fell a fraction of an inch, but he still stared straight forward, his eye on Damian, unblinking

I knew the original plan and the fact Troy was going to be paid handsomely for breaking Romero out of the castle, but that wasn't what Damian had been

planning all along. Troy was tricked. Surely, Damian didn't mean to pay him still, if he had been planning to do so at all.

"I did promise you didn't I?" Damian took another step forward.

"Promise him what?" I snapped, attempting to step out from behind Troy.

Troy blocked me, pulling me back behind him. But Damian had seen me fully, and his eyes widened, then his mouth curled into a malicious smile.

"Well done, Troy."

"Don't speak to me, or to her. Leave, now!"

I'd never heard Troy speak in such a tone before, his voice carrying through the clearing in a crisp, commanding way

"I was going to make you my heir, you know. You, the rightful prince-but wait, Romero is dead, isn't he Troy? My man Horace saw to that, for you."

"What is he trying to say, Troy?" I whispered into his back.

"Why don't you tell her for yourself, Troy? Who you really are?"

"I suspect she already knows." Troy answered, his tone biting.

I had no idea what he meant, honestly. He was Madalynn's child; I knew that much. He mentioned his father's name had been Behar. And his grandfather was

"You're a prince," I said quietly, the pieces falling into place. I didn't know why the thought hadn't crossed my mind before.

"More than that," Damian folded his hands behind his back and paced, meeting my eye. "He's the hereditary Alpha of Poldesse."

I bit my lip to prevent myself from saying my thoughts aloud. Surely, Troy wasn't planning on acting on that

"It can be all yours, Troy. The Kingdom of the Isles. Valoria is weak, ready for your hand to rule. I paved the way for the dynasty your grandfather always wanted. All you have to do is give me the girl."

“No,” Troy said firmly without hesitation.

“No? This was your mother’s dream, you know.”

“I didn’t know her,”

“You would’ve been a different man had she raised you. A better man-”

“I will not allow you to lay a hand on Maeve.”

“What would it matter? I just need her blood. You can have the child she carries-”

Troy lunged forward, knocking Damian flat on his back. But before I could act, the large man, Damian’s *crony*, had his arm around Troy’s neck and was forcing him to his knees.

Damian got to his feet, gracefully brushing the dirt from his knees. He looked at me, smiling.

I swallowed back the fear beginning to well in the center of my stomach. Old Maeve would’ve given this man a piece of her mind, maybe even socked him straight in the nose.

Pregnant Maeve was a little tired.

“Maeve, run!” Troy bellowed, just as the large man threw him to the ground.

I turned on my heel and started back toward the tunnel but tripped over Pete, who was still sprawled out on the ground. I caught myself on one of the beams holding up the entrance to the tunnel, one arm wrapped protectively around my stomach.

Damian grabbed me from behind, his fingers tangling in my hair as he yanked me off the beam and dragged me toward the door of the tomb.

“Get off of me!” I screeched, reaching up and pinching his hand with my fingernails.

He was surprisingly strong for his age, but he wasn’t much taller than me. I thrashed and squirmed against his hold on my hair until I heard his breath quicken with effort.

Troy had been cursing and trying to twist out of the large man's grasp.

"Turn his head toward her," Damian commanded, and the man knelt on top of Troy, his knee keeping Troy flat on his stomach. Troy was furious, his lips pulled back over his teeth. "If you shift, Troy, I'll kill her right now, right in front of you." Damian produced a knife from his pocket, testing the sharpness of the blade on the sleeve of my shirt.

I went still and closed my eyes, trying to calm myself by breathing through my nose.

"Maeve, it's going to be okay," Troy said hoarsely.

Damian tugged my hair again, making me wince. He laughed, enjoying the spectacle.

"You don't even know her powers, do you, Troy? Spawn of a White Queen," Damian pulled up the sleeve of my skirt, exposing my skin. "Cut her and she heals-"

"Don't! She hasn't come into power yet!" Troy said in desperation.

I focused my gaze on him, trying not to cry. Had it just been me, Damian would be on the ground beneath my feet, begging for his life.

But I had the babies to consider. Damian needed me, and if I cooperated, I could likely secure Troy's safety as well.

"Do you know how to open the tomb?" I exhaled, turning to look Damian square in the eyes.

He seemed taken aback by my sudden submission, but seemed pleased, loosening his grip on my hair

"I do, but *you're* not going to like it."

"Try me," I said, my voice edged with annoyance.

He tossed the knife in the air and caught it, gripping it tightly as he let go of my hair completely and positioned himself between me and Troy, blocking Troy's view of my face. I swallowed the fear that tightened my throat and waited for him to say, or do, something.

"It requires a sacrifice, Princess A dead White Queen must be laid before the door-"

"You're wrong, Damian." I mustered all of the courage I had to speak with my voice wavering.

He arched his brow, giving me a look of pure challenge. "Oh?"

"Give me the knife, I'll show you. You need me, don't you? I will open this door for you. I will show you how to access the moonstone's power. But I want something in return."

He blinked, the corner of his mouth twitching as he contemplated his response. "What makes you think I need you to access the power-"

"It's your decision, Damian," I said, hoping he didn't call my bluff. I didn't know what to do with the moonstones once I had them. Una hadn't been sure.

He looked at me for a moment, then turned his head to look down at Troy. Shrugging, he handed me the knife, taking a step away from me lest I lunged at him.

I thought about it, especially as I examined the knife's weight and feel in my hands. I could throw it at him, aiming for his neck, killing him in an instant.

But I'd have his big, burly bodyguard to worry about after that, the same man who had his huge hand pressing Troy's head into the dirt.

"Go ahead, Princess," Damian said calmly, tilting his head as he watched me while I lifted my hand up, bringing the tip of the knife to the palm of my hand.

I resisted the urge to grimace as the blade sliced shallowly into my skin. Damian was grinning broadly, his eyes creasing with pure, unadulterated greed as I squeezed my hand, my blood welling between my fingers.

He took a quick step toward me, plucking the knife from my hand as I stole a glance at Troy, who was glaring at me in warning.

"Don't do it, Maeve," Troy hissed.

I bit my lip, hoping he could see the desperation in my gaze. Then I turned from him and walked to the entrance of Lycaon's tomb, my breath catching in

my throat as the air seemed to still around me, as though it was holding its own breath as I stood before the door.

What next?

I held out my hand, inhaling deeply, then placed it on the symbol in the center of the door.

My hand tingled, little pricks of electricity racing through my palm and up to the tips of my fingers. It was uncomfortable, but I fought against it, keeping my hand planted firmly on the stone.

I could hear Damian laughing behind me, his voice lifted in excitement as the door began to give way, the rock crumbling at my feet.

Suddenly, I was being pulled backward by Troy, his arms coming around my chest and moving me out of harm's way as the door splintered and fell away in large chunks.

Before us was a tunnel built into the side of the hill, carved into the stone. Damian was already inside of it, looking around, his face twisted in delirium. He looked like a child, really, seeing something

incredible for the first time.

"We're going, we have to get Pete and get back to the ship—"

"I need the moonstone, Troy. Do you not remember what happened in Dianny?" I whispered, watching Damian closely.

"He can't use it without you," Troy protested, his voice a low hiss.

"We don't know that for sure. We don't know how it works. We don't know if he already has one." pushed away from him, stepping forward into the tunnel

Troy huffed, beyond frustrated, but he knew he wasn't going to convince me otherwise. I didn't wait for him to catch up as I followed Damian into the depths of the tomb, my eyes forward.

"Where the hell is it?" Damian was furious, looking more like the sinister man I had envisioned he would be. He swept his arm across a table, sending the ancient crockery to the floor in a shower of hardened clay and ash.

“I don’t know,” I said firmly, looking around the wide stone room littered with overturned pots and other stone vessels filled with what would have been priceless artifacts.

But there were none left.

Someone had already been in the tomb. Their footsteps in the dust when we breached the main room was a dead giveaway. Damian had screamed in frustration and panic, kicking and breaking things like an unhinged toddler.

Troy, and the large man who Damian had been calling Rex, were standing with their arms crossed, waiting for Damian to finish his tirade,

“You know where it is, don’t you?” he sneered, baring his teeth at me.

I arched my brow, losing my patience. “Yeah, I’ve been here before. I come here all the time!”

Troy cleared his throat, his mouth twitching into a smile and showcasing the dimple of his right cheek. Rex was holding a lantern, lighting up the entire area in soft yellow light.

“You stupid, stupid bitch! Where is the moonstone!”

“Not here, apparently. Maybe listening to Romero was a bad idea, Damian. I never met the guy, but *from* what I heard, he had more than one screw loose-” I shrugged.

Damian kicked another large clay vase and knocked it over, screaming at the top of his lungs in fury. He was breathing heavily, his shoulder tight with tension and his hands clenched into tight fists. He mumbled a curse under his breath, then turned to face us, his eyes flaming in the lantern light.

“Lets go,” he grunted, starting back towards the tunnel. Troy was at my side in an instant, his hand gripping my upper arm as we walked between Damian and Rex. My heart was pounding against my chest, adrenaline coursing through my veins as the light of the outside world came back into view. I

didn’t know what was going to happen once we were outside.

But suddenly the ground seemed to fall from beneath my feet. I stumbled, Troy catching me as struggled to stand upright. I couldn’t breathe.

“Troy?”

“Maeve? What’s going on?”

I closed my eyes, trying to catch my breath. But when I opened them again, I wasn’t in the tunnel. I was standing beneath a birch tree, its yellow leaves rustling in a cold, mountain breeze.

“She will never know her mate! She won’t, do you hear me? Do you understand

“The doctor is on his way, I promise. Please, Leera, let me help him!” Mom was crouched over the body of a young boy, her white hair falling over her face.

“That child is a curse on your family! Everything she will set in motion-” The woman with the black hair said, her gray eyes fixed on mine as she spoke. Mom turned her head to look at me, her brow furrowed, her blue eyes glistening with tears.

“Run, Maeve,” she said softly, her voice heavy with emotion.

“Mom? How-”

“She’s everywhere. Run. Please-”

*I don’t understand!”

You can’t come home. You have to get far, far away. Promise me!”

“No, I

“Maeve! RUN!

She was gone in an instant, passing through me as I came back to reality.

“Troy, something’s wrong. Somethings

I was standing in the clearing outside the tomb, Damian holding a knife to my neck. Troy was just inside the entrance, in his wolf form, his eyes narrowed on Damian and his lips pulled back to show his teeth

Rex was holding something in his hands, looking over at us, waiting.

"Do It Damian sneered, his breath tickling my ear.

I watched in horror as Rex turned to the entrance, pressing a button on the detonator in his hand, which sent a rush of rocks tumbling down over the entrance of the tomb with Troy still inside.

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Chapter 67: Marry Me

Rowan

The little blonde girl seated at the kitchen island was busy concocting some potion, from what I could tell. She glanced up from her task, glaring at me, then turned her focus on a bottle of calamine lotion that was sitting next to the sink.

"No," I said firmly

Kat shrugged, picking up a whisk and dipping it into the batter bowl.

"I'll just wait for you to leave," she sighed, her blonde curls bouncing around her ears as her tiny arms fought against the batter. Katerina was only nine but had a personality that could bring even the fiercest warrior to his or her knees. The last time I had seen her, she had been barely four years old, and she had been a handful then.

I stood, sliding the stool back into place and gingerly picking up my coffee mug, peering in side in the event she had put something inside of it when I wasn't looking.

**Don't eat the cake," she said casually, the whisk chiming against the bowl. I turned my head to look at her, the hair on my arms standing on end. Maybe I wasn't ready to have children.

I could hear Talon in the dining room berating my Aunt Vicky for showing up at Winter For est, unannounced and apparently unwelcome. Caroline and Sarah, Vicky's older daughters, were snickering at the bottom of the staircase, shushing each other as they eavesdropped on the con versation taking place in the dining room.

"Technically, you told Paul not to come, not me," Vicky sipped from her mug, watching Talon's face flush with fury over the rim. I leaned on the archway, catching Dad's eye from his perch near the window that looked out over the deck. He was trying not to laugh.

"Why the hell would you bring the girls"

"Georgia and Rosalie have been wanting to see their nieces."

What kind of excuse is that?" Talon hissed.

"And besides, how else would I have been able to get that letter to you?" She motioned to a single piece of paper laying in the middle of the table with her mug, rolling her eyes. "For Goddess's sake, Talon."

could snatch it away

"How many warriors is the Alpha of Breles sending to Mirage?" I asked, just as Talon picked the letter up and folded it into a tiny square, tucking it in his pocket while he glared at Vicky.

thousand, give or take. The lesser Alphas are putting an army together," Dad stepped toward the table as well, gripping the top of one of the dining chairs. "We're going to leave tomorrow

to Mirage..." I breathed, lifting my coffee mug to my lips. "Things went so well time."

ignored me, turning to talk to Talon. Vicky reached over and squeezed my arm, beaming up

you found your mate. That's wonderful! It's so good to see you, Rowan. So

meet her soon. Mom's been keeping her busy." I replied, not sure how much she actually knew about the situation. I was aching to see Hanna, actually. The last several days had passed in a blur of activity. Georgia and Talon had been in Winter Forest for almost a month, and Vicky had shown up only two days ago, bringing all three of my cousins with her. The house felt a little too warm and crowded with the entire family congregating inside

and Hanna had moved into a small cabin nearby, one of the older ones nestled in the trees near the edge of the new village. Vicky and the girls had

been sleeping in the guest room, while Georgia and Talon took Maeve's room, for now. Dad had some of the pack members getting the White Queen's castle ready for people to sleep in again, its many bedrooms having been empty for years, just so he could breathe

a

to be enjoying the company, however. She was happier than I'd seen her in years. She loved the cousins and had been doting on Gemma, who seemed to be doubling in size by

I asked, looking over

S

I saw, he was in the village with Gemma; she saw the midwife

so looking forward to meeting their baby." Vicky smiled, glancing at Talon, who shook

LL

"No, you'll be back in Breles"

"Like hell I will, Talon!"

my lips, nodding a farewell to Dad before turning on my heel and leaving the dining room, glancing down at Caroline and Sarah before I walked down to the garage and out into the driveway, carrying my

Will they have a wedding?" Hanna asked as she poked a long piece of seaweed with a *stick*.

I shrugged, stepping gingerly across the wet rocks along the rocky beach as I walked along the shore at low tide.

"Probably, although I don't think Talon and Georgia are as traditional as Dad when it comes to that sort of thing. Ernest is an Alpha; he can do as he wants. Gemma will be his Luna, though. I know that **much**."

"She'll be great at it," Hanna stooped to investigate a rock, plucking it from the beach. She walked toward me: her mouth stretched into a smile. "Look this aren band...I think *that's jade*."

"You're probably right," I took the rock from her hand, holding it up to get a better view of *it in*

the fading light. The tide was coming in, crashing against the shoreline and sending a surge of bubbling gray water through the rocks beneath our feet. I started to hand the rock back to her, but she shook her head, smiling up at *me*.

"You should keep it; it'll bring you good luck."

"Okay, I will," I said softly, tucking it into the pocket of my jacket.

Hanna seemed happy here, for which I was thankful. We had been taking walks together almost every evening, walking far from the village and along the shoreline until the lights of Winter Forest were tiny specks on the horizon. She was drawn to the beach, which wasn't a surprise to me *at all*.

"**Will we** have a wedding?" I asked without thinking. I fought against the blush rising on my cheeks, shaking my head. "I-I'm sorry. I *didn't mean,*"

"If you want a wedding, Rowan," she said with a soft smile, her eyes creasing at the corners as she leaned on her stick, **watching me**.

"*I mean,* yeah. I think we're going to have to have one...being mates and **a'll**"

"We don't have to rush into **anything-**

That's not what I meant-"Goddess, I wanted to kiss her. I wanted nothing more than to take her into my arms and hold her against my chest and feel her hair against my neck. I wasn't a saint by any means. I had been with women. Kissed them... and more i'd had crushes and even a few girlfriends. But Hanna was so different, so completely and utterly perfect that it almost didn't *feel real*

But I could barely bring myself to touch her, knowing that once her hand was in mine it would be painful to **let go**.

"I love you, Hanna. I want you to know that," I said, closing the distance between us. She looked up at me, her eyes shining the rich *crimson sunset*.

"Why?"

Why?" I repeated, slightly taken aback,

"Just because we're mates-

I-I really do. I do. And it doesn't matter if you don't feel the same way. I know we haven't known each other long and... it's been

gave me a knowing glance, then laughed, reaching up to tuck her dark hair

to tell you that before I go back to Mirage. I needed you... I needed you to know, even if you don't say it back. That doesn't matter to me. If something were to

You'll be fine, Rowan,"

something happens here, though, Hanna. Just know I'm coming back, and when I'm back - I took her hand in mine and turned us back toward the village. I didn't even know what I was going to say next. Her touch calmed me, setting me at ease as her thumb pressed into the palm of my

come home, we should build a house."

small, with a spiral staircase and a large window overlooking the water, a reading nook, and a large study with a bookshelf that goes all the way to the ceiling. We won't hang art, not yet. I want our children's drawings to line the walls..." she trailed off,

"You can have whatever you want."

children could inherit my powers, Rowan. What

could also inherit... whatever I

up at me, furrowing her brow. I swallowed, not sure how to explain this to her. I wasn't sure of it

heal quickly, you know. I can sense people's deepest emotions and play on them. I don't know how they compare to my mother, or even Maeve, but I do possess them. I won't be a... White King. That's not how this works. But our kids would be... different, Hanna. But they'd

sure this is the life you

to say yes without hesitation but couldn't bring

be honest?" I asked, turning to

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Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 288

Chapter 68: Death of a White Queen Hanna The waves were lapping against the shore in a graceful, rhythmic pattern. I like this water.

It was frigid, biting, and sent a jolt of electricity through my body whenever I reached my hand down into the rocks and let it glide over my bare skin.

Rowan swam in it on occasion.

I loved to watch him as he did laps back and forth along the breakwater where the water was calm and safe from the swirling rip currents.

We had been taking long walks together lately, always ending at the port.

I would perch on a rock and watch him dive into the water, his chestnut hair clinging to his skin as he moved gracefully against the heavy silt.

Like a seal, I thought with a smile.

Or an otter.

My Rowan.

How odd we must seem to other people.

We were not the typical mates.

We'd known each other for almost three months and had yet to touch more than occasionally intertwining our fingers while we walked.

We barely spoke, in fact.

But I found solace in our silence.

Rowan had never once chastised me for my uncontrollable powers.

He never judged, rejected, or ignored me.

I was just Hanna to him.

Not a witch.

Not a dream dancer.

I was just the girl I hadn't yet had a chance to be.

Watching him board the seaplane once again stung more than it had the first time.

They were all going, the men, leaving us women behind while they congregated with the Alphas of the East to settle things in Mirage.

I stood on the bluff overlooking the port while the plane took off and circled over the village until it disappeared into the low hanging clouds, and I could feel Rowan's presence no more.

This time was different and would be different.

I wasn't a stranger to Rowan's people any longer.

Rosalie was interested in me, enthused by my powers.

She could sense them and make sense of them in a way no one else had done before, save for my mother before she died.

Even Kacidra had softened to me, opening up her heart and accepting me for who, and whatever, I was.

And then there was Gemma, who had the strangest aura about her, something that pulled me in and kept me hooked on her every movement and every word.

She had felt so familiar to me in the same way Rosalie felt familiar.

I often wondered if Gemma had powers of her own, something buried deep inside, something dormant.

But that didn't matter at the moment.

I was standing along the shore as Rosalie, Kacidra, and Otto's wife Shelly fussed over the row of white roses that lined the stone fence along the inner wall of the cemetery further up the hill.

The Temple to the Moon Goddess was nestled snugly in a crop of tall spruce trees overlooking the water, and the voices of the women carried on the soft breeze that touched my cheek as I closed my eyes and breathed deeply the scents of salt and pine.

I was supposed to be here right now.

I felt it in my bones.

Why, I didn't know.

taken some coaxing to get Shelly to join us on

was a good thirty minute walk from the village, and she was reluctant to leave her young children

I knew there was more

Shelly didn't worship the Goddess.

had been reeling from the events Rowan had described during one of our

a strange person in a strange land, someone who didn't quite fit

Much like myself.

had a single conversation with Shelly, but I felt a bond with her,

called out, her voice mingling with the crashing

my head to look up at her, her blonde hair swaying in the

on, it's time!" I let out the breath I had been holding and turned to look over the water

been practicing for this moment I had successfully pulled myself in and out of my dreams

found Maeve, confirmed she was safe

wanted more, something I wasn't sure I

to try to go with me into the

wasn't about to tell her

licked my lips, chapped from the salt spray, and turned toward the temple, tucking my hands in the pockets of the sweatshirt I had found in Rowan's

smelled like him and gave me comfort as I maneuvered over the rocks to what felt like an uncertain

was watching me closely as I entered the cemetery through the rusted gate, closing it behind

were full of roses, and a hint of smile was evident on the corner of her mouth as she watched me, her gray eyes focused

once, then turned away as she continued to converse with Kacindra, who was alight with

had gone inside the temple, the door left

smell the matches she used to light the candles at the altar the second I stepped into the

an odd rush of air touch my skin despite the stillness in

The candles didn't even flicker.

hairs on my arms and neck rose as I watched Rosalie move around the altar, striking match

looked so young in the soft multi-colored sunlight drifting down from the stained-glass windows, the reflection rippling over her hair and cheek as she turned to light a single candle that had been placed in the hand of the statue of the

against the lump in my throat as I gazed up at the faceless statue of the

etched out of pure granite, crafted as though the temple had been built

hand held the candle, while the other hand was outstretched, fingers splayed and palm facing the ceiling. The fingers of that hand were darkened from centuries of being touched by parishioners who knelt before the statue, reaching their arms up to touch her fingertips as they prayed, much like Rosalie was

ever prayed to the Moon

But I sought her.

sought her in

if I could only catch a glimpse of her, maybe I would know her reasons for giving me the burden I

that I was standing before her likeness, I felt

Unsure.

And scared "I don't think we should do this, Rosalie.

My voice was trembling as Rosalie turned around, her eyes fixed on **mine**.

"I won't force you to, Hanna.

I promised you that."

"I don't think I can.

What if something goes wrong? What if-" "We're in the **sanctuary now**.

This is her place, her domain.

That's why I chose it.

You said you dreamt of a white temple and now we stand inside of it." Rosalie had laid out several white roses on the altar that was situated between the stone benches and the statue, her fingers lingering on the petals as she watched me with a careful eye, "I don't know why you want to do it," I confessed, my voice straining with a silent plea.

She wouldn't force me, that was true.

But I couldn't deny her desires to see Maeve alive and well for **herself**.

She was such a stoic woman, but a **silent one**.

She carried herself with dignity and **grace**.

She would never let us see her falter or give in to her fears, her deepest *emotions*.

I wondered if she let Ethan see that side of her, but an overwhelming part of me told me that whatever she was feeling regarding Maeve, she had kept to *herself*.

And now Ethan was gone to Mirage, and she had no witness to protest her **actions**.

U

"I need to see it.

I need to see what you **see**.

I need to...to understand how this **works**.

What this means.

Not just for us, Hanna.

But for Maeve, and Rowan." "I know-" "You and I are **different, Hanna**.

The pack Lycenna needs you for something I have *to understand*.

They want...you and Rowan, and I think I *know why*.

But I need to know for sure so we can stop them."

"You're right," I breathed, surrendering.

I felt a pitch of guilt at the fact I had given up at the mention of Rowan instead of leaning against my deeply rooted anxieties about attempting to take Rosalie, the White Queen herself, into a realm outside of **my control**.

"We have to try," she continued.

I nodded tightly.

Kacidra and Shelly had come in, murmuring in *low voices*.

I could smell the roses they carried in their *arms*.

"So, how are we doing this?" Kacidra asked bluntly, leaning against the far wall.

Rosalie looked at her, then me, her expression softening as she smiled *and shrugged*.

"I think I'M just hold her hand, see if she can take me wherever she *goes*."

"That sounds too easy," Kacidra retorted.

gave her a motherly look of warning, then turned her attention back to

asked her for guidance." Rosalie motioned towards the statue nonchalantly, her eyes still focused on

we just need

I should be able to feel...

go, if that makes sense I know your method of focus 1-1 think

try" Trying is all we can do," she smiled, but I could sense her

we first talked about the idea of her being able to Dream Dance with me, I was

It sounded impossible, in fact.

she was a White Queen If anyone could do this, it

a deep breath, looking over my shoulder at kacidra

Shelly looked nervous but intrigued.

looked oddly excited and was exuding

never seen her look at me like that, and the silent encouragement began to course through my veins like

toward Rosalie, my eyes flitting up to the
had practiced, and practiced, and practiced until I got it
was confident in my abilities to will myself in and out of
I could always find the door.

But I worried about Rosalie.

my hands in hers, the two of us stood between the statue and the
said a silent prayer, not for us, but

Keep him safe.

And if anything happens to me...

Let him find his mate again.

shifted nervously on her perch on one of the benches, clutching the roses she
had picked to

her pick the thorns off the stems with interest, eventually catching

"What's the matter?"

I just...I'm sure you heard about Lycenna. And Hanna is..." "Are you a Dream
Dancer too?" I

not. My great aunt was but... not nearly as strong as Hanna. Can you," "No, I
can't." I breathed, my mouth tasting bitter, I mustered up the courage to talk
about my mother for the first time in many

with empathy, her eyes misting with tears a few times as I laid out my

had longed for my

been a time when she doted

was when she thought I would grow into my

never had, and the second Hanna had shown potential i was cast to

Shelly took my hand, squeezing.

sat in silence for a moment, lost in separate but oddly connected

looked over at Rosalie and Hanna, who were standing, holding each other's hands across

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Chapter 69:1 Felt Her Go

Ethan

Mirage was in shambles, but it was quiet. All around us people were moving as though in slow motion. It had been roughly

eight weeks since Damian invaded and tore the place to shreds. But oddly enough, the destruction was the only trace left of his invasion.

All of his warriors were gone. The castle was empty.

We had left Winter Forest three days ago, shortly after Ernest and Gemma had arrived. Rosalie and Georgia had stayed behind, and with good reason. Gemma was too far along to risk travel, and Rosalie seemed to have plans for Hanna.

U glanced over my shoulder at Rowan, who was huddled amongst a group of men pouring over several sheets of blueprints. Rowan was pointing to the lopsided radio tower that rose out of the trees and was covered in vines, his eyes shining as he explained his course of action.

I watched him for a moment, seeing at once the man he would one day become. A leader. The next Alpha King. He would inherit it all. The West. The East. Whatever lands Maeve found past the Southern channel. It would be his.

I wouldn't let him inherit ruin. I was going to end this, whatever it was.

Ernest was walking ahead of us as we sauntered around the castle grounds, bending every once in a while to examine debris left behind by Damian's men.

“He feels guilty for leaving,” Talon said, tucking his hands into his pockets as we walked.

“He shouldn’t; there was nothing he could have done.”

I believed it wholeheartedly. Mirage was a city of many packs, the territories bleeding into each other the closer you got to the city. Ernest didn’t flee like a coward. He had hidden Gemma in the center of Mirage while he gathered the other Alphas together, placing a few in charge of caring for those people who had been displaced, and the rest to fight and guard their hold on their territories that bordered the city. Then he brought Gemma home, praying to the Goddess that things didn’t unravel further in his absence.

He was born and bred to be the Alpha of Drogomor, the sole ruler of Mirage. Ernest felt like he had abandoned his people, but what choice did he have? We didn’t know then what we knew now.

he was after her, right now, while we tried to put the pieces of Valoria

come back to rule, of course. Gemma too.” Talon bit the inside of his cheek, shaking

you and Georgia should stay as

we wouldn’t think of leaving. But this is his throne now, Ethan. I have no desire to

asking you to,” I breathed, tucking my hands into my pockets. I already knew Ro would fight the decision to break the family apart again, and she was probably right about it. Regardless of the fact that Damian and his army had already left Valoria, we were on the brink of another major, far-reaching war. The Alpha’s of the west were already gathering thanks to Paul and Vicky. We had to take care of Poldesse, once and

then there was Lycenna to think about. As hard as I tried, I couldn’t quite wrap my head around who those people were or what they wanted. I dismissed the thought, for

standing next to the castle now, looking up at a window on the fourth floor. A piece of plywood covered it from the inside, the glass broken and glistening in the sun in the shrubbery

out the window to get Maeve out of the castle,” Ernest said sadly as we caught up to him, flanking him on either side. “Gemma heard it happen, but she was...

son.” Talon laid his hand on Ernest’s shoulder, squeezing. “We’re safe, all should never have let her go to get Maeve alone. I thought we had more time. We

in through the tunnels. There was nothing you could have done,” I said sternly, hoping to ease some of his guilt. Ernest looked at me, his blue eyes sharp and focused as he let out

was my fault. I showed... I showed Julian of Greenbriar the tunnel system. He asked me about it and ... I didn’t

on kid. This wasn’t-” Talon began, but I turned to Ernest, cutting off Talon with a wave of

How-but he’s an old man? What use would

“**Old?**” Ernest looked confused. “No, he wasn’t old. He was close to *Rowan’s age*-”

“*You* said Greenbriar?” Talon looked from Ernest to me, his eyes shining in **confusion**.

“**I did**, yes. He came with his sister, or wife, I honestly wasn’t sure. She was the Luna **of**,”

“*Oh, shit*,” I said, running my fingers through my hair, remembering the blonde woman with the beady black eyes who had been in the castle when Rowan and I came to the Mirage for the first time after Damian’s invasion.

“What?” Talon arched his brow, waiting for someone to explain, but Ernest shrugged.

“**Alpha Julian** of Greenbriar was blond, wasn’t he? Strange looking guy?” I asked Ernest. Ernest nodded. “F*ck. We need to go back to Winter Forest, now. All **of us**.”

“What? Why? I can’t leave before-” Ernest began, but I cut him **off**.

“Lycenna. Damian was working with Lycenna this whole time. That woman... I didn’t even realize it until now,” I was stuttering, trying to organize the plot playing out in my head. Blond, black eyes, the strange, lifted accent. Opaline and Julian weren’t of Greenbriar, no. They were Lycennian. I’d bet my life on it. Julian was likely a grandchild, or however his crisscrossed genetics tied him to Alpha Julien of Lycenna. Ernest had unknowingly opened the door to him, giving him a glimpse of the inner workings of the castle so Julian the younger could go back to Damian with a plan. With a map of the **tunnels**.

*“What would Lycenna want with Mirage? From what you told me *about them*”*

“This goes beyond territories, Talon,” I snapped, my skin prickling with adrenaline. Goddess, this was getting more and more complicated by **the minute**.

“What’s wrong with you guys?” Rowan walked up to us, eyeing us coolly.

“We’re going back to Winter Forest,” I said, giving Ernest a commanding look.

“What? We just got here! There’s work to be done,” Rowan

shifted his weight and dropped several of the blueprints he had rolled up and tucked under his arm, cursing under his breath as he bent to pick them up.

was in on the invasion, Rowan,” Talon said before

his arms over his chest,

leaving, not yet,” Ernest said

you have to,” Talon retorted, his voice carrying a stern,

How do you know?” Rowan was looking from

with little patience for an explanation. A few minutes passed as we argued back and forth, Rowan

protesting and being overall bull-headed about the situation. Rowan was clutching his blueprints in his hands, his mouth drawn in a scowl

me, Rowan,” I said sternly, but then stopped, sensing that something was

he said, but then looked away, his face undergoing an incredible transformation. His brow furrowed as he lifted his hand to his chest. "Rowan? What's the—" I barely had a chance to catch him as he fell to

wrong with him?" Talon knelt, taking Rowan's head between his hands. "Rowan,

screamed, and Ernest dropped to his knees, the three of us holding onto Rowan for dear life as he crumbled between us. He began to protest, saying "no" over

exclaimed, shaking him. I was seriously concerned; I had never seen him act like this before. "Are you hurt?"

wave of what I can describe as absolute dread washed over me, drowning me in an instant. I felt my breath leave my body as I swayed, pitching forward. I didn't catch myself, landing on my side in

the hell—" Talon's voice faded as I closed my eyes, finding it hard to focus enough to take a

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Chapter 70: Is She Dead?

Gemma

I walked through the house, my breath caught in my lungs. I felt out of body as I followed the warrior up the stairs, my eyes focused on the open door to Rosalie's and Ethan's bedroom as we climbed toward the top of the staircase.

It couldn't be true. I couldn't make sense of it.

"Send word to Mirage, immediately. I don't care if you have to send runners over the Eastern Mountains. You must get word to Ethan, now!" I said harshly, my voice steady despite the storm of vicious emotions rippling through my body. I knew it was a fruitless effort on the warrior's end. Ethan would have been able to feel Rosalie depart. He would know. He would,

Oh, Goddess, no. This can't be real.

Rosalie was laid out in her bed, her eyes closed, and hands folded neatly over her chest. I fought against the sob that was tightening my throat and nodded, accepted the harsh, unfair reality, then turned away from her to wipe the tears from my eyes. I wouldn't let them see me cry. Not Georgia, or Kacidra. No one.

Georgia and Shelly were downstairs tending to Hanna, who was breathing but hadn't woken up. I hadn't known about the plan Rosalie and Hanna had concocted. If I had, I would have stopped them. It was a stupid, useless endeavor, dark magic with now fatal ends.

The warrior had closed the door behind me when I entered the room.

I was alone with Rosalie's body.

I forced myself to look at her again, letting my eyes linger on her face. Goddess, she looked so young. Too young to be dead. I felt a rush of fury and I screwed up my face into a scowl to stop myself from crying.

"What the hell were you thinking?" I hissed at her, hot tears welling in the corners of my eyes. "How-how could you leave us? How could you? Maeve-what about Maeve? She's not ready-"

I balled my fist and punched the wall hard enough to put a hole in the drywall. I yelped, then fell to my knees, cradling my broken fingers with my other hand as I let the tears fall freely.

Oh, Maeve. Oh, Goddess, what were we going to do?

I heard the doorknob click and turn, and I rose, lunging forward to prevent it from opening but was too late. Kacidra walked into

the room, her eyes red and puffy from crying. She was a mess, her clothes tattered, and skin scratched from the glass that had covered what remained of the temple. She had a bandage wrapped around her head, and I could see the pools of blood soaking through the white fabric near the base of her skull. She had blood in her hair and on her face. She looked like death itself.

"What the f*ck are you doing in here? How dare you-" I began, my voice biting and edged with insatiable fury.

“Don’t speak to me that way,” she snapped, her eyes blazing. “You’re not a Luna yet, Gemma.”

“Get out!” I screeched, taking a step toward her.

was motionless, a challenging look etched into the fine details of her face.

“Hanna didn’t do this,” she said sternly,

almost laughed. “Oh, she didn’t? Then who,”

won’t understand. I know you won’t even try to

not going to stand here and allow you to spout that nonsense about magic dreams and powers, Kacidra. Not at the foot of her bed. Have some fucking

supposed to be alive, Gemma. You know it as much as I know it. Ernest knew you were dead when he carried you into the woods. You weren’t supposed to be standing here, right now. Why do you think you came back? Who do you think was responsible for

gaped at her, shaking my head in disbelief. Ernest had recounted the tale of what happened to us after Poldesse invaded the castle. I was aware that she knew. But I hadn’t had a single conversation with Kacidra since my homecoming. She was

her sister murdered the

wasn’t Hanna!” she repeated with heated

for real this time, looking at her, watching her face twist and then fall. I took a step forward, pointing at her with my good hand. “I didn’t

Moon Goddess spared you. She gave my sister her

“Your sister killed”

didn’t! I was there, Gemma! For f*ck’s sake, will you listen to me!” Kacidra stopped short of grabbing me by the shoulders, her hands clenched into fists at her

swallowed, my nostrils flaring as I took a step away from her and gave myself an opportunity to take a

she said to me, whatever she tried to convince me was the truth, it didn't matter. The White Queen was dead and would still be dead. Gone. Never to

"Did you hear me?"

my attention back to Kacidra, seeing for the first time the exhaustion and utter despair lingering behind her green eyes. "No-I... I'm sorry. I'm just-this is all

me, the two of us standing as close together as we could with the swell of my pregnancy in the way. I found myself resting my chin on her shoulder, sniffing as tears continued to roll hot and angry down my cheeks. She was trembling, her chest shaking with silent,

"What do we do now, Gemma?"

know. I don't know what to

"*Ethan* will kill Hanna," she said with conviction.

"I don't know if he will. I doubt... I doubt he would. But I can't say

"**How did** you come back?" Her question sent a chill up my **spine**

as I slowly untangled myself from her **embrace**.

I looked into her eyes, swallowing back the trauma I still felt from the night at the castle that plagued my dreams, turning them to nightmares.

"I just woke up in a clearing... I—" | turned from her, looking over at Rosalie where she lay lifeless in her bed.

I felt a surge of raw emotion as I imagined what Ernest must have been thinking seeing me sprawled out in a similar fashion, lifeless. I reached up and ran my fingers over the necklace I was wearing, the circular moonstone set in white gold. I had a small burn mark on my chest, the scar only a smooth, white patch on my skin now, but at one time it had been **raw, aching**.

Suddenly, the room seemed to spin. I reached to grip Kacidra's shoulder for support. She said something in alarm, but the blood hammering in my ears drowned out her *words*.

The first thing I remembered after the invasion of the castle wasn't the cloudless, morning sky above my head. It wasn't Ernest's voice lifted in shock.

I remembered waking to an awful stinging sensation on my chest. I had reached up to touch it, feeling only the necklace my mother had given me. It was hot, so incredibly hot to the touch that I couldn't help but let it go. And then I sat up and watched as the bite marks on my hands and arms faded. I thought I had

dreamt it.

Suddenly, it was so real.

What had Rowan told Ernest about Hanna and her dreams? Something about a ring? No, there was **something else...**

"Oh, Goddess!" | shouted, reaching up to pull the necklace from my neck, snapping **the chain.**

Kacidra was startled by my outburst, reaching out to try to grab my arm as I moved hastily toward **Rosalie.**

"What are you doing!" she cried as I crawled on all fours over the bed, essentially straddling Rosalie's body. I pressed the necklace to her chest where the skin was exposed above her shirt, praying to the Moon Goddess to help me, to show me what I needed to do.

Rosalie was still covered in splotches of blood from where glass as sliced through her skin. "Blood... her blood, oh! Of course!" | was delirious. I had officially lost my mind as I ripped open her shirt to expose more of her chest and pulled a tiny piece of glass from the skin that covered **her sternum.**

Kacidra had her hands on my shoulders, trying to pull me away from Rosalie, but I shook her away, just as I lifted the piece of glass over the necklace and held my breath as a single drop of blood rolled down its edge and landed silently on *the*

moonstone.

Nothing happened.

off of her, Gemma! What if someone

don't understand," I said in a

Kacidra pulled me away from Rosalie and I sunk to my knees next to the bed, staring up at the profile of the White Queen as she

“She’s gone, Gemma.”

know... I just thought-how could I have

Kacidra tilted her head to the side, eyeing the necklace. “Is it... supposed to look

“Like what?”

to my feet, the breath catching in my throat as I looked down at the necklace laying limp over Rosalie’s chest. It was glowing so faintly it was almost impossible to notice it. I could see the skin around where the necklace lay began to pinken, to warm. I grabbed Kacidra’s hand,

Holy shit. I was right.

flash of light filled the room, and Kacidra screamed, sinking onto the ground and taking me with

“Not again!” she bellowed.

cradled her head against my chest as I tilted my head toward the ceiling, watching as the light from the necklace began to fade until it was gone

I said softly, letting her go and clutching the side of the mattress to pull my body upright enough to lay my gaze on Rosalie

coloring was different. The gray tinge of her skin was blossoming in a rosy apricot once again. I held my breath as one of her fingers

out a low, pained moan, and I jumped to

had scrambled to her feet as well and we were standing shoulder to shoulder as we looked down on her, tears rolling down our cheeks and dripping onto the mattress. She reached up, and in a swift, deliberate motion snatched the necklace from her chest and threw it across the room, crying out in pain as she placed her hand over her

cried, taking her by

opened her eyes, blinking into the soft

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Chapter 71 : Trapped in the Desecrated Grave

Troy

I shook out the pants I had been wearing before I shifted, sliding what was left of them over my legs. My shirt was a goner, torn to shreds from the sheer size of the beast that came into play when Maeve collapsed in my arms and Damian made his move.

That done what I could to protect her, but Damian had planned for everything. I reached up to touch the gash on my shoulder, the skin prickling with heat as I ran my fingertips over the wound, wincing at the pain. A silver knife of some sort had been thrown, missing my throat by inches and lodging itself in my shoulder, knocking me off balance and giving Damian an opening to grab Maeve and move out of the way before Rex brought the whole damn tunnel down over my head.

Bastards.

Rex had, however, dropped the lantern during his mad dash to the tunnel's opening. I picked it up, wiping dust from the plastic cover that housed a battery-powered lightbulb, and looked over the tangle of rocks and splintered wood that was standing between me and saving Maeve.

I said a quick, somewhat sarcastic prayer to the Moon Goddess, asking her to keep the lantern lit since this was part of her predestined grand master plan. Then I turned toward the darkened recesses of the tunnel that led back into the wide, triangular room that Damian had torn to shreds looking for the moonstone.

Someone else had been inside the tomb, and they hadn't used the entrance.

That meant there was another way in, and out.

I set the lantern down and pulled on my boots, looking around at the walls of the tunnel. They were etched with symbols from a language long forgotten. I had seen some of it on the map but couldn't make sense of any of it. Whatever I was looking at was totally and completely useless to me now.

“F*ck,” I whispered as I stood to my full height, wincing as my shoulder throbbed and blood began to trickle down my chest. Had the knife landed a little lower, or a little higher, I would have been dead in an instant.

only solace I had was that Pete hadn't been in the clearing when the tomb's door came down. He was gone, and I could only hope that he had gone back to camp to get

began to walk forward into the tomb, taking my time to peer at the symbols and the contents of the many broken vases and clay pots. I was surrounded by gold, a true pirate's treasure, and couldn't help but smirk as I picked up a small but heavy golden icon of what looked to be a man wearing a low, flowing cloak. I slipped it into the pocket of my jeans and tightened my belt against its weight. I'd give it to Keaton to sweeten the apology he would no doubt be expecting for the mess I had led him

know how much time I had spent milling around the room, kicking clay and sifting through piles of sand that had filled the vases. It wasn't until I found the altar that I realized we had overlooked something major, something Maeve had mentioned in the many stories she had told me about her parents over the course of our journey. Something about a flower, but a

and ran a finger along the carving of a lily at the base of the altar, tracing the stem to where the altar met the cracked tile of the ground. “A moonlight lily? Is that what it was called?” I asked aloud, looking around as if the Moon Goddess was going to appear before me and answer my

told me the story of the battle, which had been one of her favorites when she was young. Her mother needed the flower to save her father's life, and it only bloomed at a specific time, under a specific

blood had been needed to activate whatever powers the

not-” I pressed the palm of my hand to my chest, the blood oozing between my fingers as I pulled it away and placed my hand firmly on the carving of the lily. I didn't have special blood, I knew that much, but I had nothing to lose at this

there with my hands pressed against the altar for several minutes and nothing happened. Frustrated, I pushed my hand against it with all my might, grunting with effort before pulling my hand away.

altar had moved, shifting a fraction of an inch across the tile, a puff of dust in using all of my strength to push against the altar with my full force, straining against the sheer weight of what must have been a solid chunk of granite. The altar crunched and splintered the tiles as it slid across the ground, revealing part of

huffed, catching my breath. I wiped sweat from my brow and ran my fingers through my filthy, dust covered hair. I felt like a little boy, bursting with

anticipation as I pushed against the altar once more, revealing the trapdoor in its entirety. The wood was ancient and broke easily when I slammed my foot through it, revealing a staircase leading down into nothing but *darkness*.

I held the lantern over the hole, noticing a set of shoeprints in the thick layer of dust covering the stone steps. Someone had walked up and down the staircase several times, always stopping roughly six steps away from where the trapdoor used **to be**.

My chest tightened with anxiety as I looked at the prints, knowing with all of my being that someone had been trapped down there, much like I had been trapped in the main part of the tomb myself. I swallowed my fear and stepped down into the darkness.

The skeletal remains of the man were resting against the corner of the square room. In the center of the room was an open sarcophagus made of pure granite, its lid broken into pieces on the ground at my *feet*.

I was having a hard time catching my breath as I looked from the sarcophagus to what was left of the man who had gotten trapped within the burial chamber of Lycaon himself. What a way to die. I didn't like this, not one bit.

I stepped forward, peering gingerly into the sarcophagus and let out my breath when I saw it was empty.

Goddess, what the hell was I doing in *here*?

I moved toward the skeleton, holding my lantern up to look down on the man, or what I assumed had been a man at one point. His clothes were nothing but decayed rags now, hanging off of his bones. One of his hands was clenched into a fist, and the other held what looked like **a book**.

I stooped, biting my lower lip as I carefully and gently took the leather-bound book from his hand.

I jumped to my feet as his bones gave way, splintering into a heap of bone fragments and dust at *my feet*.

whispered, wincing as his skull slumped forward and his hat fell off. I picked it up, dusting it off on my pants before placing it back on his

gave the skeleton once last, weary glance before I slumped against the far wall and set the lantern on the floor. I looked around, seeing no other way in or out of the burial chamber than the stairs. That meant the dead man had made it into the burial chamber from above and had been purposefully left down here. How he had gotten into the tomb itself was

dusted off the book and opened it, finding it in a fairly good shape for its age, which based on the last entry was over three hundred years ago. The paper was yellow but sturdy, and the ink he had used to write was still legible although it had faded to a pale gray. I scanned through it, reading whatever pages weren't stuck together, and found out the dead man's name,

the hell did you get in here, man?" | whispered, glancing over at

Then I read the letter.

Casimir and his crew have finally breached the innards of what appears to be an old temple of some kind. It took all of our tools, plus some fashioned from split and broken rock fragments, to loosen the stone blocks these ancient people had somehow carved and placed in a puzzle-like pattern, making it nearly impenetrable. Casimir has called off any further exploration for the day, as it is now raining harder than I've ever seen it and our site is flooding, but I am hopeful that our party can go further into the underground dwelling

The rain has finally stopped, but now we are down five crewmen. A strange sickness has gripped the camp, and it has taken some of our best archeologists into early graves. At first, I believed what the camp doctor told us; it was only a flu. But the men who died were the ones who had removed the stones blocking our entry to the temple. I mentioned that it was odd but was dismissed by Casimir. He is ready to continue exploration of the site and is sending some men inside the temple in the morning. I must go with them, as I am the only one who can read the ancient Lycaonic script found all over

To whomever is reading this, heed my words. Whatever is inside of this temple is cursed beyond a reasonable doubt. No sooner did we breach its walls into what looked like an ancient room for worship did two of our men succumb to fits of tremors so violent they cracked their skulls on the tiles, killing them almost instantly. Had it only been one man, I would have had my doubts, but two was proof enough that we were not meant to be inside these walls. Casimir wouldn't hear my protests, and instead pushed forward. He bypassed the riches in plain sight and began to roughly dismantle the altar, pulling it from the very ground. Again, my words of harsh reproach were cast aside, and within an hour his men had pushed the altar sideways, revealing an entrance to what I now call the stairway to hell, to my

how I wish I would have listened to my instincts that begged me to turn and run from not only the temple but the island altogether. But I was just as greedy as Casimir. I wanted to know what lay beneath this ancient city. I needed to understand the ways of these people, long lost to time. But the second I laid eyes on the resting place of what I knew was once a cherished Alpha, all was

his grave, smashing the lid of his tomb into pieces and plundered the jewels that once hung around his neck and fingers, his body long turned to dust. All that time left behind were linens so ancient they disintegrated in one's hands. I realized at this point that Casimir was looking for something specific and had yet to find it, because he had grown desperate, and was barking orders as though I were one of his warriors and not a man

reader, I leave out the next passage to spare you the details of an event I do not have words in which to describe. All I can say is that I woke up alone, locked in, nothing but a single candle to light up the eternal night and a silver dagger lodged in

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The moonstone.

Chapter 72: When a White Queen Dies Maeve

I didn't even fight as Rex dragged me away from the tomb. I was limp in his arms, my strength spent, every cell in my body bursting with pure, unadulterated grief.

I felt empty.

I didn't notice how the landscape changed as Rex carried me over a rocky hill and down into a small, sheltered cove. I didn't notice when my hands were tied behind my back around a tree and I was left on the shore, facing the water.

Troy was trapped inside the tomb we had spent months trying to find

And something had happened to my mother.

I could feel it in my bones as I looked out over the water, a great transformation taking place within me minute after minute, the image of the two wolves I had seen in the circle of stones flowing in and out of my mind.

"Not yet. I'm not ready to lose them," I whispered as I sat on the beach, waiting for whatever came next.

Damian's cruiser was rocking on the water in the distance. It was a large, modern boat, its white frame glimmering in the sunset as I sat on the beach just outside of a large canvas tent at Damian's beach camp.

I counted nine people in total, including Damian. I had been watching the cruiser for several hours and hadn't seen a single person moving across the deck.

Nine people, that was it. That was all that was between me and getting back the Persephone for help freeing Troy from the tomb and doing whatever it took to get back to Winter Forest as quickly as possible. If I could get free....

I wondered how quickly I could get there if I stole Damian's boat.

A laugh rang out somewhere behind me, and I winced, turning my head only slightly toward the noise. That's when I saw her, and my skin prickled with heat.

"Opaline?" I said, as though to myself.

She was within earshot, however, and looked right at me as she walked along the beach, her icy blonde hair trailing behind her.

She bowed dramatically, then laughed again as she rose, tucking her hair behind her ear. "Princess Maeve, our royal fugitive!"

"What the hell are you doing here?" I hissed, digging into my restraints with my nails.

“I could ask you the same thing, but I already know. On a little treasure hunt with your boyfriend, huh? I see he was a successful breeder.” She walked toward me, stopping short of me by mere feet.

cheeks flamed with fury as I narrowed my eyes at her. “You didn’t answer my because my soon-to-be husband is here, that’s

“Who? You’re already,”

Julian? He perished in the invasion,” she said, giving me a faux frown before she began to laugh

against the lump in my throat, sensing there was much more to her story about her brother’s, or husband’s-whatever he was-death. She watched me for a moment, then knelt so we were at eye level. She tilted her head from side to side, her black eyes

“Damian is making me his Luna.”

I said, the sarcasm in my voice

be Luna of all of it, Princess. Every inch of the

“Okay,” yawned.

her lips, unhappy about the lack of reaction she was getting out of me. “Did you not hear what I

did. But, you’ll have to pry the title of Alpha King out of my father’s cold, dead hands before you can ascend the throne as

I haven’t?” Something in her voice made the breath catch in my

at her, trying to peer behind her haunting eyes. “You’ve seen him? My

I’ve seen him. He came to Mirage not long after the invasion with his son, the heir.

gripped my chest as I leaned forward, frantically picking at my restraints.

“Where are

doesn't matter, does it? A lot has happened since you fled from Valoria, Maeve. Like

flee. I was being held against my

the man you now love, the same man who is the father of your

my lip, closing my eyes to stop the tears welling in the corners of my eyes from running down my cheeks. I couldn't possibly be this alone, could I? Dad and Rowan wouldn't have gone down

"*Tell me* what happened," I said firmly, my voice edged with righteous fury. Opaline smiled menacingly, her eyes narrowing into cat-like **slits**.

"**Opaline, that's** enough." Damian's voice wafted over to us, and Opaline turned her head, her face falling as her opportunity to torment me further evaporated into *thin air*.

Damian approached us, looking tired, his eyes lined with dark circles and his hands bandaged, likely from the injuries he had sustained when he tore the tomb to pieces. He reached down and picked me up by my restraints, lifting me to my feet and roughly pushing me forward to keep in step with him as he led me into a large canvas tent.

Opaline followed but was quickly dismissed before she could gain entrance to the tent. I gave her a menacing smile of my own as the tent flap closed in her **face**.

To my surprise, Damian cut the rope that bound my hands behind my back. I looked around, taking in the splendor of the tent. The sand had been covered with large rugs, and several couches had been placed around the table Damian had been using as a desk. This place looked lived in, like Damian had been here for quite *a while*.

"*How did* you know where to find the tomb?" | asked without even thinking. The question had been at the tip of my tongue since my arrival at his **camp**.

He shrugged, motioning for me to sit as he took a seat behind the desk. A large tray of food was sitting on a side table. It was nearly nightfall, and it had been almost ten hours since Damian had taken me away from the tomb. I was starving.

“I have a friend,” he said casually, cleaning off his glasses with **his shirt**.

“A friend?”

“**Don’t listen** to Opaline; she is upset you weren’t dealt with right away.”

I turned away from the food and stared at Damian, wondering what exactly he had planned for me.

“She said my father went **to Mirage**.”

“*He did, yes,*” Damian breathed, looking down at a map on his *desk*.

“*Uh, and? What happened to him?*” Desperation was tying my stomach into a **knot**.

“**He** left with your brother. They were headed north, over the *Eastern Mountains*.”

“The Eastern Mountains? Why?” No one had ever been able to cross those mountains to my knowledge.

“I don’t know, Maeve. And don’t ask me if they were successful. I’ve been out of range for weeks chasing this damn-” He looked up at me, his face totally serious and tone stone cold as he continued. “Where is the *moonstone*?”

I wondered if he knew there was more than one, but decided not to mention it.

“*I assumed* it would be in the tomb. That’s why we came... but you obviously didn’t find anything.”

glared at me. “Don’t play dumb. What did you want it

“To stop you from taking it.”

has to be more to it than that, Princess. What were you planning to do with it? What powers were you wanting

have no idea what you’re

told me everything, you know. About what happened to you in Dianny. She warned me your powers were unreachable, but I wonder if that's the truth or if you're lying about

mouth had gone dry at the mention of her name. Tasia, who had been so helpful, so kind to us in Dianny, had been working with Damian this whole

you I had a friend who knew where to find the tomb." His smile was wicked, and I felt bile rising in my throat as I forced myself to look into his eyes, steeling

"Tasia is a good-

what her pack prevents her from having. She is powerful, that woman. Too damn powerful for her own good. But with the

can't use them. She's not a

a descendant of the Moon Goddess. The Lycaonian line has always been much more powerful than the White Queens. I thought you'd know this already, having seen Dianny and

feeling lightheaded. Damian was right; Dianny held great powers in its valley. But Una had told me not everyone had the powers of Lycaon, that they were rare. That Tasia had been the first one born with them in

you planning to do, Damian?" I was growing impatient. Every minute that went by was another minute Troy was trapped in the tomb and my mother was dying-at least that's what I felt like was

it all, Maeve. I won't lie to you about that. But, I don't possess great powers like you and your mother and Tasia. Your father got lucky when he ascended the Alpha King's throne. He's been a lucky bastard his entire life. I've had to grovel and sow my path to the crown every waking minute of every day. It's mine. It's mine as much as it should have been Romero's, don't

stood, walking around the corner of his desk and then leaned

needed you to gain access to the cave. I thought you knew where to find the moonstone and could harness its powers for me. Troy falling for you only sweetened my plan. I planned to use him against you to do my

bend, break you. But without a moonstone, Troy wasn't necessary."

"I don't know where it is,"

but that doesn't matter anymore. I can still use you to get what I want. Your father hasn't given up his search for you. Before we traveled through the pass I heard he was building

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 293

Chapter 73 : Winter Forest Will Fall

Maeve

I spent the next two days being moved between Damian's tent, where I was allowed to eat, and a tree just above the shoreline, where I was tied up, my hands occasionally bound together above my head if Damian felt like being extra cruel.

He had continued his ceaseless interrogations, asking over and over if I knew where to find the moonstone. He seemed less interested in how to use it, however, and was growing more nervous with each passing hour.

I was beginning to think this wasn't his plan. That, or he was in way over his head doing someone else's bidding.

I just couldn't bring myself to believe that person was Tasia.

I had spent nearly three days in contemplation, racking my mind for any hints of malicious, secretive behavior on Tasia's end during my time in Dianny. Our stay in Dianny had been an incredibly strange, confusing time, however, and even if she had said something, or done something, that would've given me a clue about her true motives I could have easily missed it.

Troy had said she could move air, I remember that much. Then I

thought about the strange storm that had rocked the Persephone while we traveled through the pass and wondered briefly if Tasia had been behind it. Wind creates weather, right? Or was it something else?

"I should have listened when you were talking to me about meteorology..." I sighed, thinking of Troy and wishing I could tuck the loose curl that had been

tickling my nose for hours behind my ear. My wrists ached where they had been restrained, the skin raw and dappled with blisters where the coarse rope met and rubbed against my skin whenever I moved.

I felt a strange sensation in my belly, however, momentarily distracting me from my precarious situation. One of the babies was moving, rolling, his feet gliding over my belly button.

“Ooph, that feels weird,” I smiled, then grimaced as the other one, at least I thought it was the other one, kicked me sharply in the side. “You guys are getting big.”

It was well past dark now, the stars simmering over the calm surf rolling up the beach in the shelter of the narrow cove. Damian’s empty boat was still rocking in open water roughly a half mile from the shore, its white body reflecting on the water in the light of the moon.

“I gotta get out of here,” I whispered, wondering if anyone was going to come to release me from my bondage so I could lay down and go to sleep on one of Damian’s couches like I had the last two nights in a row, never out of the watchful eye of Rex.

I heard a low hum as I continued to watch the water, so low it was nearly inaudible. I tilted my head to the side, wondering if I had somehow gotten sand in my ear and it was messing with my hearing, but the hum was getting louder, growing closer.

I saw the skiff as it inched out from behind the rocky bluff sticking out of the water at the edge of the cove, the nose of the small boat lit by moonlight. I squinted, wondering if what I was seeing was real and not a figment of my pained and dehydrated imagination.

One of Damian’s warriors was sitting on the beach, his head slumped forward as he slept. He was supposed to be on guard while the rest of the warriors slept in a second tent nearby. He hadn’t heard the skiff.

A wave of excitement washed over me as the humming started up again, a handful of darkened figures coming into view as the moonlight cast shadows over their bodies.

I held my breath as I turned my gaze upon the sleeping warrior, a second skiff appearing in my peripheral.

They were sneaking into the cove.

I knew without a shadow of a doubt it was the crew of the Persephone.

I could have cried, but instead, I very quietly attempted to stand,

leaning against the tree for support as I shimmied upright.

Suddenly, the first skiff let out a roar as the engine was pushed to its max, the boat flying into the cove in a boom of noise.

The sleeping warrior woke with a start, crying out.

But it was too late.

The first skiff met the beach and continued up the sand, sliding to a stop and spraying a sheet of sand over the warrior. The warriors' tent flashed with light as someone turned on a lantern, shouts of alarm ringing out from within as everyone woke up and began to file sleepily outside.

Then all hell broke loose.

The beach had erupted into chaos. All around, me people were scrambling out of their clothes and shifting as the crew of the Persephone stormed the shore. I could hear Damian screaming harsh commands as he emerged from his tent, his voice lifted in surprise as Keaton jumped out of the skiff, a long spear in his hand. Myla followed, then Pete, and several other familiar faces began to run toward Damian's meager forces, not even bothering to shift.

I fought against the rope binding me to the tree outside of the tent as I watched the fight take place. The entire crew of the Persephone was on the beach now, outnumbering the seven or

so warriors Damian had at his disposal by at least three people.

Damian hadn't been expecting this. He had underestimated us.

"Keaton!" I cried over the fray. He turned his head toward me, nodding once before using his spear to block a wolf from lunging at him, smashing the creature down onto the sand with all of his strength.

But my outburst had drawn the attention of someone else, Damian, who had been standing dumbfounded as he watched his warriors get completely overrun.

He stalked toward me, pulling a knife from his pocket.

Suddenly, a dark wolf appeared out of nowhere, who I recognized as Myla. She tackled him to the ground, holding him down by his neck. She looked at me as if asking for permission.

I nodded.

“This isn’t over. You kill me—you think that will solve this, that it will bring peace... I was never the one you needed to worry about. Everything is already in motion—” Myla bit down, and Damian went quiet. I looked away.

“No!” Came Opaline’s voice in a shrill wail of utter despair. She was running toward us, frantic, her eyes wide with disbelief.

“Cut me loose, Myla!” I screamed, seeing the knife Opaline had a death grip on. I wondered why she hadn’t shifted yet, when everyone else had besides Damian. She looked scared, and distraught, but most of all, dangerous.

Myla had leaped in front of me, standing between me and Damian’s body. Opaline stopped short of us, holding the dagger up as though she were going to strike Myla with it, but her hand was trembling.

“Do you realize what you’ve done?” she screamed, her eyes welling with tears. “It’s over now, all of it. Damian was the only one she would listen to. He was the only one who could reason with her. She’ll do it, Maeve. She’ll take over the pack lands and leave nothing but destruction in her wake!”

“Tasia? No, she won’t. She can’t. She doesn’t have an army—”

“She doesn’t need one! Don’t you understand? Don’t you see?” Opaline was desperate, her voice carrying over the sounds of battle behind her on the beach.

Myla let out a low growl in warning as Opaline stepped forward, but she had let her arm fall, her knife at rest along the side of her thigh. “Tasia is the only one who can defeat your mother. If she makes it to Lycenna ... it will be over, Maeve. Winter Forest will fall. Damian was trying to prevent that from

happening. He wanted the crown, of course. He wanted power. But he knew if he let Tasia wage war over the moonstones, it would destroy everything, and he would be left with nothing to rule but a land

of chaos, a land the Moon Goddess would leave behind.”

“I’ve had enough of this magic!” I hissed, bucking against my restraints.

“You don’t understand what his death has started. I can’t help you. I can’t-I won’t be on the wrong side of this war.”

“Damian is the one who invaded Valoria. He was the reason,”

“I loved him,” she said softly, her eyes fixed firmly on mine. “He didn’t need to die!”

“He deserved it, Opaline, for the carnage that he caused and wanted to cause in the future. He was going to kill me and take my children,”

“He would have saved the pack lands from Tasia. Now there’s no one who can stop her.”

“You’re wrong about her. The Daughters of Artemis are a peaceful people”

“Oh, Maeve. There is so much you don’t know.” Opaline swallowed, then looked down at Damian, her face turning red as anger began to replace her fleeting grief. “I was supposed to be his Luna. I was supposed to be the one on the throne. I was going to take your mother’s place, you know. Lycaon was supposed to be the one we worshiped, not the Moon Goddess

and her daughter. It was supposed to be him. He was the rightful heir, not Morrighan.”

“That was thousands of years ago! It’s over!”

“It’s far from over! Once Tasia has the moonstones, she can rule, and she will conquer every corner of the pack lands. She will kill everyone who worships the Goddess. She will kill everyone in the line of Morrighan, don’t you see? She killed her own people to do so,”

“What?” I said, the word falling from my tongue in an almost inaudible whisper. Opaline nodded her head, a wicked, oddly timed smile creeping across her face.

“Like I said, there’s so much you don’t know. So, so much you don’t know.”

“You’re lying.”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” she said quietly, and then she turned away, walking across the beach toward the trees.

“Cut me loose!” I screeched, knowing I had to get to Opaline before she escaped.

Myla bit into the rope that held me against the trees, and within a split second, my hands were free, my arms tingling as the blood began to rush back to the fingertips. “Where’s Troy? Myla!

Where is he?”

Please, I thought desperately, don’t tell me he’s still in the tomb.

It had been three full days.

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 294

Chapter 74:

The Moon Goddess Took Her Mate’s Life on Her Twenty-First Birthday

Maeve

Myla tilted her head toward the beach, but I didn’t see him anywhere. “He’s here?” I asked, my voice catching as my chest tightened with hope.

Damian’s warriors were fighting for their lives all around me. Every member of the crew of the Persephone had shifted now, and the battle was moving off the beach as they pushed Damian warriors back against the rocky bluff to our backs.

Myla was glued to my side, guarding me, snarling anytime an enemy got near enough to be within lunging distance.

‘We need to get you on a skiff,’ said Myla over the mind-link, and I looked down at her, adrenaline prickling across my skin. ‘Some birthday, am I right?’

“Birthday?” I said aloud, then I felt the knot in my stomach loosen, the realization that it was, in fact, my birthday hitting me. It was just past midnight. I was twenty-one.

“Where’s Troy?” I said again, my heart beating so rapidly I thought it might come out of my chest, forgetting about Opaline all together. I looked down at Myla, tears welling in the corners of my eyes. ‘Where is he?’ I said over the mind-link, fear creeping through my body. Did I have powers? I looked down at my hands, curling them into fists. Could shift?

‘He’s fine, he made it back to us. He wasn’t sure where they took you, but we were already preparing to go find you both. He’s probably just wrapping up the details of what unfolded here with Keaton,’ Myla said as she turned, tilting her head towards the edge of the bluff.

I could see him, in his human form now, dressed again, speaking to Keaton. He had shifted back, too, and was pulling a shirt over his shoulders. I wanted to run to him, but I knew he must be busy or else he’d already have made his way to me.

It was quiet now. The battle was over in a matter of minutes. Myla was trotting across the beach back toward the skiff, shifting back into her human form and pulling her dress over her head, smoothing the fabric over her thighs.

“This felt too easy, Maeve! Damian only had seven warriors? That was it?” Myla asked when she returned to me.

I shrugged, wrapping my arms around myself as a cool breeze drifted in off the water.

“Besides him... and Rex and Opaline, so nine or ten people total. I’m not totally sure.”

Myla looked around suspiciously, her gaze settling on mine. “Who’s Rex?”

“Did Troy not explain?”

“He was stuck in the tomb for three days, in one of the collapsed tunnels at the dig site. Pete came back and led us to the tomb. We spent an entire day trying to remove the rocks from the opening of the tomb, and he just showed up behind us one day, having come out of another tunnel. He dug his way out.”

“He dug his way out?” | gasped, looking over my shoulder at Troy, who was staring right at me as he continued to talk to Keaton.

He hadn't come over to me yet, and based on the look on his face, I wondered if he was keeping his distance on purpose.

TE

The moon was shining down on us, the sky dappled with stars. Myla walked past me toward where Damian's body lay sprawled out on the sand, his throat stained red with blood. She picked up his arm, turning his watch towards me.

“It's 12:23,” she said with a soft smile, letting his arm drop. “Happy Birthday, Maeve.”

“Thanks,” I said, attempting to sound grateful as I grimaced down at Damian, trying not to think about his last words, and then Opaline's words of warning. Where was she, anyway?

I could feel Troy's gaze on my skin as I looked back over to him. He was walking with his hands in his pockets behind Keaton and Pete as they made their way back to the beach. Troy looked up at me, eyes sparkling in the moonlight.

He was close enough for me to see the way the moon turned his eyes a deep, navy blue and a soft steel gray. He was wearing one of loose white shirts and it rippled in the breeze as he neared.

What was I supposed to feel, if he were my mate? Myla and Gemma had barely explained it to me, too wrapped up in their own feelings to help me understand. I already knew his scent. His touch already set my skin on fire with lust. I was drawn to him like a magnet, but those things had felt normal, not destined. I had felt them long before I turned twenty-one.

“Should I try to shift?” I asked Myla.

She looked me up and down, shaking her head. “You should talk to my mom first, before you do anything.”

I nodded, uncertainty tightening my chest as Troy stopped to talk to one of the crewmen, turning his head back toward me as if in slow motion.

PARO

A scream broke the silence of the beach, the sound echoing through the cove. I saw a flash of blonde flying from between the trees, then Pete and Keaton were running to Troy's side.

Troy was looking right at me, his face twisted in a confused expression as he placed his hand over the center of his chest. Pete had wrestled someone to the ground behind him, and Keaton had grabbed Troy by the shoulders, catching him as he collapsed to his knees on the sand.

If I had screamed, I didn't hear it. I was running but barely felt the ground beneath my feet. I fell to my knees next to Troy, taking his face between my hands "Troy!"

"WATCH OUT!" Pete cried, just as something hit me across the face, and I fell backward into the sand. I heard Myla scream with fury, spraying sand as she sprinted after Opaline, who had broken free from Pete and Keaton somehow and was taking off toward the skiffs with a large stick in her hands. My vision blurred, the starry sky above me quivering as it began to spin.

"Maeve? Maeve! Look at me! L-look at me right now! I need you!" Keaton was smacking me on the cheek, making my eyes water. I reached up to touch the wound on my forehead, wet with blood.

"Oh..."

"Get up, GET UP!"

I blinked into the darkness; my vision obscured by the blood trickling down from my forehead.

"Troy? Hey-hey, man just wait... Wait a minute. Maeve. Maeve! Listen to me. Please, don't-don't pass out!" Keaton was desperate as he pulled me upright tilting my head to look down at Troy.

His breathing was coming in gurgling rasps, his eyes half open. My throat tightened as I stifled a sob, my head pounding so violently I felt like it was going to split in half. "Troy?" I said in a faint whisper, reaching down to touch him. "You're-you're cold

"

“Go back to Winter Forest,” he said with considerable effort, his lips barely moving.

“We’re going to go back together”

His mouth twitched into a smile, his left cheek dimpling.

“Both of us are going, Troy, we’re going to get on the boat now

—” I said, coming back to reality. His shirt was black with blood, the crimson liquid soaking through the gaps between his fingers where his hands lay against his chest.

Topened my mouth to speak but could only muster a choked cry.

“I know. It’s going to be okay. K-Keaton? Keaton?” I looked around, searching frantically in the dark for Keaton’s form. I felt his hand in mine suddenly, and he lifted it into the moonlight, his knife in the other hand. “Do it,” I said weakly, swallowing against the fear welling inside of me that was telling me my powers weren’t strong enough to save him.

Keaton’s blade met my hand, and I squeezed my fingers around it, not even wincing at the pain. I held my hand over Troy’s mouth, my blood falling onto his lower lip.

“Please,” I prayed, taking his face between my hands once again.

“Maeve?”

“I’m here.”

“I’m not going to make it this time.”

: I felt my world shatter at his words which were laced with cold

finality.

“Yes, you are,” I retorted, trying to smile. Tears were falling down my cheeks, running along my jaw before they dropped onto his shirt. I could see the blood beginning to soak into the sand beneath him, and then I knew.

(Lv.1

He was right

“Tell me about Winter Forest,” Troy said softly.

I bit my lip, trying to hold myself together. Keaton’s hand came down on my shoulder, squeezing gently, his other hand resting on Troy’s leg.

“It’s-It’s cold there, but it feels nice. Crisp, and clean. In the winter the snow piles up against the buildings and we used to... used to slide down the snow chutes on flattened cardboard boxes. We—we-“I choked on my tears, not daring to close my eyes lest he take his last breath while they were closed. “The sky is almost purple there, violet, especially when it starts to get dark. The mountains turn pink in the evening when the sun sets. It’s... it’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. I can’t-I can’t wait for you to see it.”

“Maeve?” he breathed; his voice edged with fear.

“I-I’m here. We both are. Keaton Keaton and I.”

Keaton took a strained breath, a moan of absolute despair escaping his lips.

“I can’t do this without you, Troy!” | sobbed, running my fingers through his hair.

“I’m always going to be here,” Troy whispered, his voice barely, audible. “You won’t be alone.”

ESS

“I want you to stay-”

“I can’t.”

“Please try!” I knew my words weren’t registering any longer.

TL

His eyes were fluttering as he tried to keep them open, his breathing becoming more and more shallow. His fingers twitched as though he were trying to move his hands, and Keaton quickly bent over me, his body hugging mine as he took Troy’s hand and brought it to my face. Troy’s mouth flexed into a brief smile as I leaned into his touch, my tears wet against his hand.

He took one more pained gasp, and then he stopped breathing.

He was gone.

I was in shock for a moment, unable to process the scene before me. I felt incredibly despair and indescribable pain. And then hot, uncontrollable fury.

“This is what she meant, wasn’t it?” I said under my breath, my mouth trembling around my words to the Goddess. “When she she said I would never know my mate it was because... because you were going to take him from me? Wasn’t it? That’s what she f*cking meant!”

“Maeve-” Keaton’s voice was in my ear, his hand still pressing Troy’s hand to my cheek.

I shook my head, Troy’s hand slipping from Keaton’s grasp and falling into the sand, his palm towards the sky.

“You broke me!” I screamed into the night, oblivious to the small crowd that had gathered around us. “You took my mate. You took him! I won’t know my wolf because you’ve shattered ev everything I’ve ever loved. 1-1-1 hate you. I HATE YOU!” I was losing control. If Keaton hadn’t been holding me tight enough to keep my arms pinned to my sides, I would have swung at him just to feel something other than the splintering agony that was ripping me apart from the inside out.

“Get her out of here,” Keaton’s voice sounded far away, and I felt Cleo’s comforting hand on my shoulder, urging me to come with her, to move.

I straightened my back, flexing every muscle in my body to prevent them from picking me up from taking me away.

A hush fell over the group, a single quiet murmur of surprise weaving between us as I finally blinked away my grief and looked around at the tear-stained faces surrounding me. Everyone was looking down at Troy.

I looked down at him too, taking in every line and curve of his face, wishing his eyes were open so I could see them, one last time.

But then I saw it.

A small stone the color of the moon itself was lodged in the palm of his hand between two of his fingers. It was stained with blood from where his hand had been resting against my face, close to the wound I sustained from Opaline's attack.

I watched as it began to glow as though he were holding the moon within his hand, and then I let out my breath, closing my eyes as I collapsed into Keaton's arms.

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 295

Chapter 75: The Fourth Time I've Died for You

Maeve

"This is at least the fourth time I've died for you-or almost died for you," Troy said weakly as Cleo rolled a bandage over his chest. "You're going to marry me."

"Okay," I whispered, my mouth trembling as I smiled, and my eyes welled with tears. I looked from his face to his chest, which was moving up and down as he breathed.

He was breathing. He was alive.

And he had a moonstone.

Keaton was sniffing behind us, Myla murmuring reassurances in his ear as she stroked his back with her head pressed against his shoulder

I'd had a strained relationship with Keaton since the day I met him. I thought he was ornery and arrogant, and I would continue to think that, but kneeling on the beach with him while Troy died in front of us had cemented an intimate type of relationship between us a shared indescribable grief, and eventually a communal joy when Troy opened his eyes once more.

We were all standing in absolute disbelief, still processing the events that had taken place in the last thirty minutes or so. Troy had died and come back to life. Damian was dead. Opaline had been captured and was hogtied and laying in one of the skiffs, her screams of frustration mingling with the rush of the incoming tide.

And we had the moonstone we had come all this way for.

“We’re going back to Winter Forest now,” Troy grunted, trying to sit upright despite Cleo’s protests.

“We—we can’t. We have to go to Dianny first-“ | stammered, stepping forward into the circle that was standing around Troy.

“Maeve’s right. We can take whatever goods we find here back to the Persephone, but we’ll need to stop to-”

“Tasia-” Myla and I said at the same time, which caused the low murmuring taking place around the circle to quiet.

I sucked in my breath, glancing at Myla before exhaling deeply and telling everyone what had happened, and what had been said, after Myla killed Damian.

Keaton’s face fell at every word. I knew he was thinking about Robbie. We all were. I didn’t know if I fully believed Opaline, but even Damian had warned me about Tasia and her powers.

“We have to go back and see what happened. If there were survivors. If Robbie...” | tucked my hands into the pockets of my pants. I was filthy, still in the clothes I had worn when we entered the tomb three days ago.

“Robbie would have made it out; he’ll be fine,” Keaton turned to Troy, offering his hand. Troy took it as Keaton helped him upright, holding onto Keaton’s shoulder for support as he stood, wobbling for a moment before regaining his composure.

It seemed that my blood hadn’t healed him. The moonstone had brought him back to life, but he still had a deep wound across his chest. Pete was holding the knife Opaline had stabbed him with during her attack, turning it over and over in his hand.

“We’ll split the supplies Damian has here at camp,” Troy said firmly, looking from face to face. “Maeve and I are going north, back to the pack lands... to Winter Forest. The rest of you will go to Dianny.”

“Troy, we should go with them,”

“No,” he rounded on me, looking irritated. I pursed my lips, biting the inside of my cheek as he continued. “This was the plan all along, to stop Damian from getting his hands on the moonstone. It’s done. It’s time for you to go home, Maeve.”

His tone was incredibly harsh, and I felt myself beginning to cower. He was angry, whether at me or the situation, I wasn’t

sure.

But Troy was watching me with interest as he spoke, his eyes boring into mine. I could feel his gaze all over my skin and it brought a warm blush to my cheeks. I looked away from him, knowing exactly what he was looking for. He knew today was my birthday. He knew what that meant.

I wondered if he felt the mate bond.

I wondered if he knew I didn’t.

“Troy’s right; we split up. Someone find the keys to that cruiser in the distance,” Keaton stepped out of the circle, letting go of Troy. He was barking commands to the crew now, his skin tight with dried tears. I swallowed against the apprehension tightening my throat and looked at Myla, who just shook her head.

“We’re really going to split up?” I said to anyone who was still listening.

“I want to go north with you.” Pete had stepped forward, his words directed at me instead of Troy. This took Troy by surprise, and he turned to face Pete, his brow furrowed.

“That’s not up to you—” Troy began.

“I’d never been off the Isles when I first boarded the

Persephone. Now, I’ve traveled south, about as far as you can go. I didn’t find her,”

“Find who?” Troy asked, narrowing his eyes.

“My... mate.”

Keaton let out his breath, shaking his head as he chuckled and turned to face us. "I knew it all along,"

"I'm serious! I want to go with Maeve. I want to see the world north of the Isles—"

"Fine!" Troy bit out, reaching up to hold his hand against his temple. He swayed, and I jumped forward, wrapping my arms around him before he fell over. His body was warm against mine, and I couldn't help but lay my cheek against his back, thankful when his body softened to my touch. "I'm tired. I'm really... I just need to lie down."

"That's fine. There're couches in the big tent. You can rest while the rest of us gather up supplies." I whispered against his skin. I felt him nod, weakly, his muscles trembling as he took a deep breath.

Then he moved out of my arms and walked in silence toward Damian's tent.

"It's not you, Maeve. He's hurt." Keaton was looking at me, his eyes shining in the moonlight.

I swallowed hard, nodding as I looked down at my feet.

Keaton was only half right.

It was daybreak. Light was filtering through the tent flap and people were walking by with bundles of supplies in their hands. Cleo came in carrying fresh bandages, and I sat up, giving her a soft smile.

"How was he last night?" she asked as she sat her bundle down on Damian's desk and began to unroll the bandages.

"He woke up a few times.... He's in pain, Cleo. I offered to help him but he-he told me not to bother." I tried to hide my hurt but failed, my cheeks flaming with a furious blush.

"I'm sorry he said that to you Maeve. I'm sure he didn't mean it to upset you." She soaked a rag with what smelled like pure alcohol, and I sucked in my breath, imagining how much it would sting when she cleaned Troy's wound with it.

"I want you to watch me do this, okay? You're going to have to do this when we... We..." She paused, biting her lip and shaking her head as she set the alcohol-soaked rag on a small tray. "I can't say I'm totally on board with you traveling with Troy and

Pete without me with you, being as pregnant as you are."

We had talked about it the night before. Troy, Pete, and I would be going north in Damian's cruiser, while the rest of the crew of the Persephone would be going to Dianny, which included Cleo. She had protested, but I knew she would come to regret being separated from Myla if she didn't go with them, especially after hearing the story of Cleo's mate.

"I'm going to be fine," I said reassuringly, trying to sound sincere. I had at least three months to go before I gave birth, and a two-month-long journey to Winter Forest. Troy stirred, shifting uncomfortably on the couch near Damian's desk, his eyes fluttering.

"We're going to have to leave soon. Keaton is taking Opaline on the Persephone,"

"No, he's not." Troy rolled onto his side, hissing as he struggled to sit upright. His bandages were red with fresh blood. He blinked into the soft morning light, his gaze settling on me for a moment before looking at Cleo, then her bandages. "No," he said curtly, crossing his arms over his chest.

"You'll get a raging infection, Troy. We've been over this twice already." She took the tray between her hands and stood before him, giving him a motherly look, something that demanded obedience.

He surrendered, his Adam's apple bobbing as he accepted his fate, and Cleo started to unwind the bandages over his chest wound.

I wanted to look away, but Cleo called me over. "This is the area you need to worry about, right here. See how deep this is? I'm going to stitch it up-"

"No, you're not-" Troy closed his mouth and breathed through his nose as Cleo gave him another cold look, then settled back against the couch.

"Anyway, I'm going to stitch him up. But you still need to clean the entire area at least twice a day. When you get to Winter Forest, your mother should take

a look at it and see if she can help him, okay? He might have some nerve damage...”

I nodded, fighting back tears. I hadn't told anyone about the painful feeling lodged in my chest that was telling me something was dreadfully wrong in Winter Forest.

I continued to watch Cleo, listening as she told me exactly what she was doing and why. As she was wrapping a fresh bandage around Troy's chest, I looked up into his eyes, which were focused on mine again with the same intensity as the night before. He said something to Cleo, and she nodded in response, turning away from him and gathering her supplies before she left the tent.

I held my breath as I sat down on the couch across from Troy, my mouth going dry. He cleared his throat, and I looked up at him, waiting for him to ask me the inevitable.

But he didn't speak. He just stared.

“I don't feel it, Troy,”

“I know you don't. It doesn't change anything.”

“Of course, it does!” I cried, wringing my hands together. “I'm not your mate. Your mate is still out there somewhere, and I... I won't let you sacrifice that happiness. If you found her I would... I would let you go. I would.”

“I feel it, Maeve, even if you can't.”

His voice was incredibly serious, which matched the look etched on his face. There was no softness in his features. He wasn't trying to convince me. He was telling me it was so.

“There's a difference between being in love and being with your mate-”

“How do you know?” His eyes were shining in the sunlight coming through the tent flap. I looked away from him. “How could you possibly know the difference? What do you feel for me, Maeve? Tell me how it's different.”

“I love you”

“That is enough for me.”

"It's not enough for me." I bit my lower lip, wishing he could just peer into my mind and help unravel the tangled web of emotions I was feeling. I loved him. I wanted him. He was the father of my unborn children.

If he was my mate, I couldn't feel it. I couldn't even feel my wolf. My blood didn't possess healing powers.

I was useless. I wasn't a White Queen.

And it would kill me if he found his mate and refused her because of me. I wouldn't let him sacrifice that right, that gift. I loved him too much to let him do that for me.

"We've talked about this before," he said, but I interrupted him, holding my hand up to silence him.

"It doesn't change how I feel!"

"You're mine!" He looked like a totally different person than the

Troy I had once known during those early, easy days at the Castle in Mirage. His hair was much lighter now, bleached a soft chestnut brown by the sun and curled softly against his shoulders. His skin was still deeply tanned, but his face was etched with lines of fatigue from months of turmoil and stress.

He looked tired, annoyed, and overall displeased.

I could see the silent plea of understanding in his eyes. It broke my heart

"I can feel it even if you can't," he said as he rose to his feet, baring his teeth against the pain. "I have been beaten, broken, and seen death for you, Maeve."

"I'm sorry for all of that,"

"Don't apologize to me!" He took a wobbling step forward, his hand coming up to press against the wound over his heart, closing his eyes for a moment. "I would do it all over again. I would. And I've told you time and time again how I knew you were my mate the second I saw you. I was watching, you know, before I even knew who you were. I had seen you in the market twice before the day we met. I thought you were the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen in my life. And that day... the fight, you remember? I started it."

“The street brawl? When I got pushed into the street?”

He nodded, taking another step toward me.

“I was in the bar, waiting to meet with Horace on the castle grounds, just trying to pass the time. But I also knew *you* passed by Johnny’s almost every day at the same time in midmorning. I saw your hair in the crowd, and I stood up from

the barstool so abruptly that it fell over and landed on someone’s foot. He thought the man standing next to him had stepped on him, so he pushed him. And then the fight started.”

“And you ran outside-”

“And caught you right before you broke your damn ankle. Touched you. I felt it then. I’d had a feeling what I was feeling was the mate bond, but... that cemented it for me.” He took another pained step forward, shaking with effort.

“Troy, you need to sit down!”

“You’ve been fighting against everyone, and everything, your entire life, Maeve. I know you can’t feel the mate bond. I understand your hesitation to believe that we are actually mates. But I feel it. I know it in my soul that you are it for me. For always. I died on that beach knowing I had gotten everything I ever wanted, and that my MATE would be caring for my children. I was okay with that. I didn’t fight against death because of it.”

“Stop-”

“Surrender, Maeve.”

“What if you’re wrong?”

“I’m not wrong. Maybe I was wrong about the curse, okay? You’

re twenty-one now. You should have your powers, and you don’t, right? You haven’t attempted to shift yet, and I don’t think you should until we get you home—

“And Ernest’s dream came true when... when Gemma-”

“I know,” he said softly, his hands shaking from pain as he gripped my shoulders. “But we have one of the moonstones. That’s enough for now. You need to go home, Maeve. We need to just... see what happens.”

“My mom... something is wrong”

“We’re going to fix it.”

“14”

“I’m going to fix it. I promise. I’m going to get you back to them. I promised you that a long time ago.” He leaned forward and rested his forehead against mine as he closed his eyes, taking a shuddering breath. He leaned further down, his breath tickling my ear and the side of my neck.

I shivered from the sensation; it felt like it had been such a long time since he’d had his hands on me.

“Maeve?” He said my name like a whisper.

“Yeah?”

He kissed my neck, then my shoulder, his teeth grazing my skin and sending an electric sensation through my core. He was holding onto me for support, easing me down onto the couch. The kiss became intense as he reached up and tangled his fingers in my hair. When his other hand came down to cup my breast, I pulled away from the kiss, grabbing his face between my hands.

“You are seriously injured!” I hissed.

“Not injured enough to prevent me from doing this!” He pulled my hair, not even to hurt me, but enough to expose my neck to him again, his mouth lingering just above my skin. Oh, I wanted him. I wanted him in more ways than one. And I knew what he wanted from me. He wanted me to surrender. To finally submit to him. To accept what he believed as fact.

So, I did.

And if anyone had come into the tent, they would have found us in a very compromising situation.

Troy had me on his lap, my dress hiking up over my waist as I rode him, trying with all of might to be gentle. He held me close, kissing my chest and neck and running his hands down my back.

He reached up to touch my cheek, running his fingers along my jaw. "I meant what I said on the beach. We're going to get

married. You're going to my wife," he said in a gravelly, strained voice. I grabbed my hips, guiding my movements and forcing me to slow my pace.

"I-I know," I panted, on the edge of my own release. "I want that too, if you're sure."

"I'm sure," he groaned, closing his eyes. I kissed him softly, my lips barely brushing his. "Maeve?"

"Am I hurting you?"

"No, no-not at all.." he inhaled deeply, then paused as if catching his breath. He wrapped me in a close embrace, trembling slightly as he held me still.

"Troy, what's-"

"I don't have a ring for you. I'll get you one."

"That doesn't matter to me, you know I don't wear jewelry!"

"I'm going to mark you. I want your permission-"

"Think-think about what that would mean, Troy, before-"

"Is that a yes?"

"It's-it's not a no?"

He bit down, hard, and I closed my eyes.

Fireworks erupted over my skin. All of my senses seemed to heighten for a moment, making me dizzy and driving my pleasure over the edge. I moaned, partly from the pain of the bite but also at the feeling of him inside of me, unable to hold back any longer.

Before I could stop myself I had his skin between my teeth. I felt like an animal, feral, burning with uncontrollable desire.

Is this what it's supposed to feel like with your mate? Why didn't I know for sure?

I bit down, leaving my mark on him, forever.

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 296

Chapter 76: Changing Course

Troy

"Are you sure about this?" Keaton tossed a bundle of supplies taken from Damian's camp into one of the skiffs, glancing up at me as I handed him a basket filled with what looked like a varied assortment of dried food.

"I don't have time to return to Dianny. It's halfway through August already. We have until late October before

"Before the ice, I understand." Keaton wasn't happy about my decision to break from the Persephone and head north with Maeve and Pete, but it was the only option. I had spent the majority of the morning convincing Maeve that I loved her, going as far as to mark her, cementing our bond in the most permanent way possible. Maeve was royalty, however, and I had a feeling her dad was going to be pissed that I had marked his daughter without blessing our union first, but I didn't have much of a choice. I wasn't about to let her go. "But I'm not talking about that."

"What, then?"

"Alpha King Ethan is going to kill you, Troy."

"And leave his grandchildren without a father?" I retorted, leaning against the skiff as I tried to steady myself. The bandages around my chest were already matted with dried blood, and I was exceedingly lightheaded. I needed rest, but we needed to get off this Goddess – forsaken island first.

"Don't be a prick," Keaton said with force. His displeasure was palpable. "I just saw you die and come back to life. And now? I'd hoped the plan was to get Maeve back to Winter Forest and leave her there"

“You knew I was never going to just abandon her, Keaton. Come on.”

Keaton crossed his arms over his chest, shaking his head.

“What do you have against Maeve? Seriously,”

“I have nothing against her,” Keaton bit out, his voice edged with bitterness. “In fact, I quite like her. Had it not been for her, I would have never met Myla. But she is blind to your situation, Troy. Totally oblivious. She didn’t know about the weight of your deal with Damian, did she? Not until recently.”

He was talking about the fact that I was the rightful Alpha of Poldesse, something I had never considered actually claiming. I had known since Damian intercepted one of our

cruisers a year ago and had the crew send word to our compound in the Isles that I needed to see him.

Keaton and I had thought it was about business. We had been working for Damian for several years at the point but had never done business with him directly. We just smuggled goods to and from the Isles.

I didn’t mention it to Maeve because it didn’t matter to me, and I figured she’d drawn her own conclusions based on the fact I was Romero’s grandson, but it had gone right over the top of her head. We had been busy, anyway, chasing a damn gemstone to the ends of the Earth.

“I’m going to let Poldesse dissolve-”

“You can’t,” Keaton said firmly, “There would be a power struggle, Troy. Poldesse would end up in someone else’s hands, and who knows who that would be? Damian had close ties with prominent families all over the Isles, people that have no business having that much power.”

“Then I say I’m Alpha in name and let-”

“And let the people of the Isles suffer under the rule of a regent, likely one of Damian’s men?”

“No, it would be you. You’d be my Beta.”

Keaton let his arms drop to his sides, flexing his fingers. “You’re not thinking rationally,”

“I just been stabbed through the heart, Keaton!”

“You lose in either situation!” he shouted, throwing his hands in the air in frustration. “Goddess, Troy. Poldesse IN VADED land governed by Alpha King Ethan. It doesn’t matter what your relationship is with Maeve. You will be held responsible for all of it, especially with Damian dead.”

“What would you have me do, then? Run? Hide like a coward? Leave Maeve to fend for herself? Abandon my kids like my parents did to me? Absolutely not-”

– “This moment,” Keaton said as he pointed to the space between us, “decides everything. Your path. Your future-”

“Alpha Ethan won’t kill me,” I said with conviction, the force of my words sending a rush of pain through my chest. “I’m more worried about her brother.”

Keaton rolled his eyes and turned away from me, busy ing himself with tying up a canvas sack of goods we packed while taking down Damian’s camp.

“This goes beyond your fear of Ethan killing me-”

“I don’t think you’re thinking this through-”

“The only time we’ve been separated was when I was sent to Valoria,” I began, taking a deep breath. “You were angry with me about that too.”

Keaton straightened to his full height, giving me a look that instantly reminded me of the first time I had ever met him. He had been eight years old, the leader of a pack of orphans who varied in age, some younger, but most were older than him, young teenagers who bent the knee to a skinny, scrappy kid in cut-off jeans three sizes too big for him. His parents had died in the war, at least that was the story he told.

I’d never been loyal to an Alpha.

I’d only ever been loyal to Keaton. He was the only family I had ever had.

“I’m afraid I won’t ever see you again.” Keaton struggled with the words, tilting his head back and groaning before making eye contact with me again,

shaking his head. “It was different when you went to Valoria for Damian. We didn’t have much of a choice. You couldn’t tell him no.”

“I’m not walking into a trap, if that’s what you think-”

“I don’t think that. I just know... Troy I know the second you step foot on the cruiser, everything we worked for is over. Our crew... our ship. It’s always been ours, not just mine.”

“I know. We have mates to think about now, Keat.”

He considered this, a soft smile touching the corner of his mouth.

“Who would’ve f*cking thought?”

“Not me,” I laughed shortly, reaching up to touch the fresh stitches. We stood in silence for a moment, watching as the crew pulled down the large canvas tent and folded it up.

“If I don’t hear from you, or about you, I’ll come to Win ter Forest and kill Alpha Ethan myself.”

“You should come visit anyway. None of us have ever been that far north. Myla will want to visit Duck.”

Keaton grinned, shaking his head as he met my eyes. The actual words he wanted to say seemed to pass behind them, etched into his face. Instead, he said, “Do you think Maeve will let Duck stay with the Persephone?”

“No,” I said slowly, both of us knowing that wasn’t a fight we wanted to take on.

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Duck was running along the deck of the cruiser, his

snout gliding across the waxed floorboards as he examined his new surroundings. I could still see the Persephone on the Horizon as it headed west, its sails at full mast.

I turned toward the windows of the control room where Pete was seated behind a large dashboard with several different screens and navigation tools, his eyes wide as he marveled at technology he had likely never seen before.

“This isn’t a cruiser,” Maeve said from the railing as she tied her hair into a bun. “This is a yacht.”

“Whatever it is, it’s going to get us north much faster than the Persephone.” I swallowed the hurt lingering behind my words as I watched the Persephone gain more distance. It felt like a chapter of my life had closed, and the future felt uncertain.

Maeve rubbed at the spot where her neck met her shoulder as she walked across the deck toward the control room, which had a door leading down into the lower level of the boat. Beneath the deck was a large master bedroom and bathroom, a kitchen, a few storage areas, and a bunkroom.

It was much smaller than the Persephone, but its size would prove useful as we made our way back through the southern pass. *We* were lighter and faster. I had estimated our journey to Winter Forest to take a month at least, but at the rate we were already moving, we could easily shave off a week.

“I need to change your bandages before you go to bed,” she said over her shoulder.

“I won’t be going to bed for a while,”

“Then before I go to bed. You’re supposed to be resting!” She stopped walking and was staring right at me, dressed in one of my worn-in button-down shirts and a pair of cotton shorts she had made by cutting off the legs of an old pair of sweatpants I had tucked away in my room on the Persephone.

Nothing fit her anymore, that was true. Her slender, athletic figure had softened and rounded. She could balance things on her stomach now, and the buttons of her shirt were tight against the growing swell. I had never seen anything more beautiful in my life.

“I’ll rest,” I assured her as she slipped back into the inside of the boat, stopping to talk to Pete for a moment before disappearing from view.

Duck had followed, of course. Maeve was his person, and he hadn’t let her out of his sight since he was brought onto the cruiser.

I turned toward the railing, catching a final glimpse of the Persephone before it faded from view.

“Do you think we’ll ever see her again?” Pete said, nodding toward the speck on the horizon as he walked over to me, standing at my side.

I nodded but felt an overwhelming sense of finality as the sun began to set and the calm water was swallowed by darkness. “Keaton will come to Winter Forest when it’s safe. We can get you home... at least whenever you’re ready to do that.”

“Eh, we’ll see. I’ve seen enough of warm water and tropical weather for a lifetime. I’ve never seen snow, you know.”

“Me neither,” I admitted, wincing as I adjusted my stance. My chest was killing me. My whole body ached.

“Hey, *Troy*?”

“Yeah?”

“Did you... uh, see anything? When you died?” Pete said with a blush. He was shy, that was obvious. But I liked the guy.

“No... I don’t think I did. Just Maeve’s face, I guess. I honestly felt like when you’re just on the edge of sleep, you know, when you’re still aware beyond the point of being

able to keep your eyes open?”

“Did it hurt?”

“Getting stabbed? Yeah-”

“No, I mean, when you started to... go...”

“No,” I answered honestly, glancing over at him. “I was cold, that’s it. I was more... upset. I wasn’t ready to die, you know. I didn’t want to leave yet. I felt guilty, more than any thing”

Pete tapped his fingers on the railing, his face falling as he flushed with sudden emotion. “It was just me and my ma when I joined the crew of the

Persephone. She didn't want me to do it, but... I had to get away, see some things, do something other than fish. I had an older brother, Nathan. Nate. He died when he was sixteen. I was eight."

"Pete, I'm sorry,"

He waved his hand in dismissal, shrugging as he looked out over the water. "He nearly drowned in the cove by our house back on Drifter's Rock. He survived that, but... I'm not sure what happened. Drifters was a small village, with no real leadership. People kept to themselves. But there was a Poldesse sheriff on the island. Nate got sick from the amount of water that got into his lungs and... well, the sher

iff wouldn't let my ma leave the island with him to get help in Avondale."

Texhaled through my nose, nostrils flaring as I thought back to the Reconstruction period after the War. Pete was just a little bit older than Maeve, so when he was eight, Poldesse was still operating in secrecy with Damian assign ing elite warriors to the smaller islands to keep the villages under his thumb. I didn't even know the name of the Alpha of Poldesse in those days. I would've been eleven or twelve, and Damian had yet to cement himself as the true Alpha and was likely still working under the influence of Romero from afar.

"Nate said he wasn't ready when he died. He was... he was begging. It was the worst –" Pete cleared his throat, looking down at where his fingers were wrapped around the metal railing. "Thank you for telling me how it felt, Troy. I feel better knowing that maybe... Nate wasn't in pain."

I didn't know what to say. I reached out, wincing as the motion sent a fresh ripple of pain through my chest as I patted Pete gently on the back.

"Anyway –" Pete said as he cleared his throat again, shaking his head. "What's the plan now?"

"Head north. Skirt around the Isles, and only make land fall when we need to stop for supplies. We need to get to Winter Forest before the weather turns. We only have a two

– month window before the northern pass begins to freeze."

Opaline was being held in one of the storage rooms on the boat, our captive. I wasn't exactly sure what was going to happen to her when we reached Winter Forest, but I couldn't risk her escaping while the Persephone scoped out the situation in Dianny.

She was technically a prisoner of war, and I meant to hand her over to Ethan myself.

Hopefully, that would soften the punishment I was expecting when we arrived in Winter Forest.

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 297

Chapter 77 : An Act of War

Rowan

Dad had been in Mom's room with the door closed for two days. Gretchen, Georgia, and Vicky had busied themselves with making food and tending to the house, carrying trays of tea and snacks upstairs on a regular basis, the trays untouched as they rested on the carpeted floor until they were eventually cleared away by Gretchen.

Despite the amount of people in the house, it was dead silent. Every once in a while, someone started the washing machine in the laundry room, or a tea kettle squealed in the kitchen, but otherwise, the many occupants of the house walked around in somber, quiet steps, waiting for the door of the master bedroom to open and for Ethan to come out and explain to us what we needed to do.

Mom was alive. So was Hanna. We didn't know until we got home from Mirage that they had both survived whatever catastrophes had happened in our absence. The plane ride home had been the longest five hours of my life.

I was sitting in the den with my hands tucked between my knees, watching Vicky and her daughters chopping vegetables in the kitchen. Talon came into the kitchen, looking grave as he bent his head to whisper in his sister's

ear. He noticed me as he straightened up, giving me a tight nod, then motioned his head toward the back door as he stepped into the den, willing me to follow.

| stepped outside, closing the backdoor behind me as I moved with quick steps after Talon, who was walking briskly toward the gate leading to the trails that wove around the grounds of the White Queen's castle. All plans to move the extended family into the castle, for the time being, had ceased when we returned. No one wanted to be far from Mom.

"We need to talk to Hanna." Talon held the gate open for me as I passed through, shutting it with a soft click. "Now."

"No," I replied firmly, tucking my hands into the pockets of my flannel jacket against the cool breeze rustling the trees. We walked along the fence, and I knew he was meaning to walk out onto the road leading down to the village. Kacidra and Hanna were staying in a cabin on the outskirts of the forest, not far from where we were now.

"I understand that she's your mate, but,"

"But nothing. Hanna didn't do this."

"Gemma isn't sure"

"Gemma wasn't there!" | swallowed against the fury rising in my throat, struggling to catch my breath. We had heard a brief synopsis of what happened in the aftermath of the event that had momentarily killed my mother and put my mate in a coma.

coma.

Gemma had saved Mom's life, but how she had done so was a mystery. She told us Mom made her promise not to tell anyone what happened in the bedroom where Mom's body had been laid out. Not even Dad, which made him furious. He had locked himself in their bedroom after that, no doubt to get the truth out of Mom.

"Otto has already tried to talk to Shelly. She's terrified, Rowan. She's not saying a word."

"Then we will talk to Kacidra, she was with them. But not Hanna."

"Why not? Tell me,"

"Because I forbid it."

“You’re mate killed your mother, Rowan-”

“Talon, shut the f*ck up.”

Talon stopped walking, stunned into silence. I turned to him, fighting against the embarrassment that sent a furious

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blush up my neck. I hadn’t meant to say that out loud.

“I’m sorry,”

To my surprise he smiled, his brows arched in surprise. Then, he laughed heartily, throwing his head back.

“What the hell is so funny?” | stammered, tightening my hands into fists in my pockets.

“I’ve never heard you talk like that before. You sound ed... so much like your dad. It caught me off guard.”

“Oh,” I murmured, looking away from him as adrenaline prickled across my skin. I was thankful we were out of earshot of the house. Even though I was a grown man, if Dad had overheard me say that to Talon ... “Mom told me Aunt Georgia taught Maeve and I curse words when we were young.”

“Yeah, she did. Ernest too. Vicky wasn’t much of a help in that regard, either. I’ll never forget the time you called Ernest a ‘shithead in front of your father. You must have been seven, I think it was shortly after Maeve’s first birth day because we were all in Winter Forest for a visit. He turned-turned purple, just furious beyond belief. I was try ing so hard not to laugh and then Ernest turned to Georgia and asked her what shithead meant-”

“In front of Dad?”

“Yep. I thought he was going to kill all of us. Your moth er ended up being the one to tell Ernest what it meant.”

“Oh, no.”

“Yeah, oh, no is right.”

“I didn’t mean to cuss at you, Uncle Talon,” I said a little sheepishly as we started walking again. “I’m just... I don’t know what to do here. I just know Hanna wouldn’t hurt any one, anything... She spent her summer here combing low tide to throw stranded fish back in the water.”

–“We have to get the truth, Rowan. That’s all. Until she, and your mother, tell us what happened...”

“I’ll talk to Kacidra first. Okay? She’ll talk to us.”

“I want her to take us to the temple and show us exactly what happened. I haven’t seen it yet, but Otto said it’s in shambles. There’s not much left of it.”

“An explosion of some kind, maybe?” | suggested, but Talon shook his head.

“Gemma and Otto said the only injuries Shelly and Kacidra had were bruises and cuts from broken glass. Ros

alie too, and those wounds haven’t healed.”

I swallowed against his words, my skin feeling hot again despite the chilly, early fall weather. Mom should’ve healed almost immediately. Her blood had powers. It wasn’t supposed to be this way.

Kacidra ran her gloved fingers over the altar, which was cracked in half, the statue of the Moon Goddess directly behind it was missing its head. Talon looked around in awe, his eyes creased with concern.

“I told you, there’s no way she could have done this. There was a bright light and... it felt like all the air had left the temple. Then the air just... exploded all around us.”

“That can’t be... this.... this was a weather event?” Talon turned in a circle, looking up at where the ceiling of the temple used to be.

“No. Something happened in Hanna’s dream. I don’t know what happened though; she hasn’t said anything to me about it. She hasn’t said anything at all.”

“I need you to walk me through it,” Talon turned to us, his hands tucked behind his back.

I looked at Kacidra, who grimaced, tucking a loose strand of blonde hair behind her ear. "The air... it was wind, but it was deliberate. Like it was knowingly chaotic. I know that doesn't make any sense but... it shattered all the windows. Hanna, she... I think she pushed Rosalie out of the dream."

"Rosalie? What do you mean?"

Kacidra looked up at Talon, her hazel eyes darkened to a deep green by the overcast, gray sky above our heads. "Rosalie went into the dream with her,"

"That can't be possible," I said weakly, looking around. I craned my neck to look around Talon's body as I caught Otto in my peripheral, Shelly walking beside him with her arm tucked into the crook of his elbow.

Kacidra saw them approach, and Talon turned around to face them, a silence falling over the temple as Shelly let go of Otto and stepped forward, standing at the entrance to the sanctuary.

"Hanna's mother was Lycennian," Shelly said, her voice bold and commanding.

Kacidra seemed relieved by her presence, and I felt a pang of jealousy at the look of comfort that passed through her eyes.

Kacidra and I had once been close, but not so much anymore. It was my fault; I had been busy. I had been prioritizing splitting my time between getting to know Hanna and helping my dad piece together Maeve's whereabouts while also bringing peace to Valoria.

"You will know about Leera, Talon. She is the mother of the boy, my brother, who fell out of that tree roughly ten years ago."

"Maeve's breeder. At least the man who was supposed to be,"

"Leera was my mother," Kacidra interrupted, her face falling at the words. She picked at her gloves, looking up at Talon. "She had powers like Hanna, just not as powerful."

"What does that have to do with what happened here?" Talon asked Shelly.

“I don’t have the powers Hanna possesses. They are very, very rare. She doesn’t understand the power she has, Talon. What ... what we witnessed,” she tilted her head toward Kacidra, “it wasn’t just Hanna’s power. Someone else was involved. Someone who can manipulate air. Hanna’s powers are with water.”

“I don’t understand -” Talon looked to me for an explanation, but I shrugged helplessly.

“My grandmother told me about a Dream Dancer who left the pack when she was a child, a man who could manipulate air and water, which was unheard of. His departure was a huge deal to the pack, and the only time they sent warriors out into the pack lands to locate him. He hadn’t had children for the pack yet. They needed him for... for breeding. But he also took something from the Alpha, something sacred. A map.”

“A map? To what?” Talon crossed his arms over his chest, looking impatient.

Shelly glanced at Otto, who nodded his head, urging her to continue.

— “To Lycaon’s tomb, to the moonstone he hid away from his sister, the first White Queen.”

“What does that have to do with”

“Oh, my Goddess...” Kacidra abruptly sat down on a pile of debris, her body slumping forward in shock as she wrapped her arms around her knees.

“Gemma has a moonstone,” Shelly continued, swallowing hard around the words. “She brought Rosalie back to life with it.”

“I’ve seen a lot of strange, unexplainable magic over the years but this —” Talon’s cheeks were turning red, whether by frustration or the cold, I wasn’t sure.

“I think someone else is after the moonstone, and that’s who Hanna fought with in her dream,” Shelly finished, clearing her throat as she shifted her weight.

Otto reached out and took her by the hand, pulling her close.

“How is that possible?”

“It shouldn’t be, but whoever this person is has powers that supersede anything I’ve ever heard of, more power than Hanna and Rosalie combined. Hanna was successful in taking Rosalie with her into the dream. They were looking for Maeve. Rosalie wanted proof she was alive and... I believe Hanna got Rosalie out, but may have let this other Dancer in...”

“In? As in, here? The temple?” Talon looked around, setting his gaze on Kacidra. “Do you agree that is what happened?”

“Shelly would know more than me. I didn’t know... and I still don’t know, my mother’s connection to the pack that Shelly is from. But I saw things from the outside. There is no way that Hanna could’ve done this with her powers. And Rosalie... when Hanna shifted, Rosalie came to her. She reached out to her. Then there was the bright light and...”

and then we saw Rosalie holding onto Hanna, protecting her. I think Rosalie was trying to save Hanna from whatever she was facing, and Rosalie saved her.” Kacidra began to cry, wiping her tears away with the fuzzy red gloves she had on her hands. I breathed deeply, looking over at Talon.

“Is this proof enough that Hanna wasn’t the one who hurt Mom?”

“That’ll be up to Ethan, Rowan. Hanna and Rosalie need to explain what happened, what Shelly and Kacidra couldn’t see. He’ll wage war, I know that much. This thing... this person, desecrated the White Queen’s Temple. If that’s not an act of war, I don’t know what is.”

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 298

Chapter 78: You Don’t Have Powers Anymore,

Do You?

Hanna

I saw him walking through the cloak of fog, his body illuminated by the porch light as he neared the cabin. He saw me in the window and stopped short of knocking on the door, his blue eyes shadowed by dark circles.

I wasn't afraid of death. I wasn't afraid of the punishment coming my way. So, when Alpha Ethan arrived on my doorstep, I was ready. I had already surrendered.

He didn't come inside as I opened the door, slowly, trying not to wake Kacidra, who was asleep on the couch. He tilted his head toward the gravel road, motioning for me to follow.

It was the dead of night. The fog hung low and twisted between the sparse trees. The big house, Rowan's home, was darkened, not a single light on inside.

Ethan didn't say a word to me as we walked. He kept his hands tucked into the pockets of his jacket, his face forward. I walked calmly beside him with no questions on the tip of my tongue. I knew where we were going, and who he was bringing me to see. I knew why he had chosen to do so under the cover of darkness.

Rowan was waiting at the gate to the driveway. He gave me a reassuring smile. No words were exchanged, but his eyes were soft, their meaning clear.

This would just be a talk. Nothing more.

But I hadn't spoken a word to Rosalie since the moment I forced her out of my dream. That had been a week ago.

"Is the house empty?" Ethan's voice rang out through the stillness as he reached the stairs leading up to the front porch.

"Georgia and Talon are staying with Gemma and Ernest, and Vicky-"

Rowan's voice faded into a murmur as they disappeared into the dark recesses of the house. I started at the front door, the threshold, and a cool shiver ran up the center of my spine.

What could I possibly say to her?

The house was quiet, still. When I entered, I took off my boots and my coat, hanging it by the front door. I let my fingers linger on the fabric for a moment, closing my eyes,

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trying to remember...

“Are you alright?” It was Rowan’s voice in my ear.

I turned to him, finding him closer than I expected.

“It’s going to be fine,” he whispered, laying a soft kiss on my temple before he turned me towards the stairs.”

“Is she well?” I whispered in reply, watching as Ethan reached the top of the landing and turned into the master bedroom.

He must have turned on a lamp because soft orange light flooded into the hallway, broken by his shadow as he moved around the room.

“She’s better than she has been. She hasn’t said much she’s been asking about you.”

“Alright.” I bit the inside of my cheek, looking up into the stairwell.

“Is there anything I should know before we go up? Han na, we’ve barely spoken since-”

“No, Rowan. I’m sorry. I... I don’t know how to explain what happened.”

He only nodded, squeezing my hand before leading me up the stairs.

“And then what happened?” Ethan was sitting in a large armchair facing the bed, his elbows resting on his knees as he leaned forward in his chair, watching me intently.

I was sitting on the edge of Rosalie’s bed, my back to her, with my hands folded in my lap. I looked over my shoulder, stealing a glance at Rosalie, who was sitting up against the headboard. She gave me a soft, encouraging smile.

– + watched her for a moment, taking her in. Her hair was piled on the top of her head in a loose bun, and she was wearing a simple camisole nightdress mostly hidden by the thick quilt draped over her lap. She looked frail. The light that was usually behind her eyes was gone.

“We stood over the altar and took each other’s hands. I didn’t think it would work, but... she came with me. When the dream pulled me in, I was able to take her with me,” | explained to Ethan, looking back at him.

Rowan was leaning against the far wall, watching us, listening in silence.

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“I saw Maeve,” Rosalie whispered, her voice cracking with emotion.

Rowan straightened his back, looking over at Ethan.

“You told me,” Ethan said, his voice firm and edged with what sounded like bitterness.

I hadn’t been to the house in the week since it hap pened, but I had heard from Kacidra that Rosalie had re fused to tell Ethan what happened until he agreed that I would be there to tell my side of things. She was giving me a lifeline and the sacrifice for it had been keeping the mo ments leading up to her death, and resurrection, a secret from her mate. It was hard to wrap my head around.

“She was fine. She was happy, but –” Rosalie tapered off, sighing deeply.

“But what?” Ethan said sharply.

“We were interrupted,” I breathed, feeling a week’s worth of tension leave my shoulders.

“There was a woman, I didn’t recognize her. She... she started to argue with us. We were watching Maeve-”

“What was Maeve doing?” Ethan interrupted Rosalie, his eyes from her to me. I knew at that moment I was the

one he wanted to hear this from.

“Maeve is somewhere far away, Alpha. She has been for a while. She’s looking for the thing Alpha Damian wants, something... I’m not sure the significance. But it’s some thing that belongs to a sacred place. She’s bringing it back to where it belongs, at least, that’s what I gathered from the dream.”

“How do you know these things without actually being able to talk to Maeve?” Ethan was still skeptical about me and my powers, and I didn’t blame him. I felt the same way about myself.

“I just know. I don’t know how. I never had anyone to guide me through this, alright?” My tone was heavy, and I could feel the shift in the room as Ethan sized me up. I looked into his eyes, a silent challenge. “The woman who attacked me in the dream is another Dream Dancer. Her power is tremendous. She was waiting for me.”

“Waiting for you?” Rowan cut in.

“I think she’d be watching me for some time. She knew where to find me. But I don’t think... I don’t think she was meaning to make herself known. I could feel her there for a while now, I think before... before I ever met you, Rowan. Sometimes when I dreamt, I’d hear someone singing. I always thought... I thought it was either my mother, or the Moon Goddess. Now I know I just wasn’t alone up there, or

whatever realm the dreams take place. It was her.”

“Who is she?” Ethan asked. I knew by his tone he didn’t fully believe me.

“I don’t know her name.”

“If you had to guess,” he replied.

It was an odd question, but a strange feeling swept over me. I did know her name; it was on the tip of my tongue. I had heard it recently, spoken aloud.

“Tasia,” I whispered, thinking of the moment over dinner a few weeks ago when Gemma had said it. How could

she have possibly known the name?

“And you’re saying this is a real person,”

“She’s very real, Ethan,” Rosalie said behind me. “She tried coming through-”

“She saw Queen Rosalie and knew exactly who she was, Alpha. That’s when she attacked.”

“How is that possible?”

“The dreams are physical. They can affect you if you lose control. I used to bring water back from the dream un

til not long ago, but I learned to control it. Rosalie... she helped me. She taught me how to control that part of my self. It’s very much like controlling your wolf when you shift. It’s an unearthly power, unnatural. But this woman... took it one step further. She overpowered me; she used my powers against me. She knew I couldn’t control both my wolf and the dream and that would... create a break.”

“A break? What do you mean?” Ethan looked interested, as though he was finally getting a grasp on what I was trying to say

Rosalie exhaled, picking at the quilt. “Hanna was holding my hand in the dream. We both thought it was the only way for me to continue to stay... inside. Inside of it. When the woman, Tasia, began to circle us, Hanna... pushed me out. She let go of my hand, but she-”

“Rowan is the door to my dreams. I just have to think of him. He keeps me tethered to our reality. He is my mate. When I realized what was about to happen | said your name, Ethan, so Rosalie would picture you. So she could seek you out. She was gone. Tasia followed her-”

“You’re saying she made it into the temple, physically?” Ethan looked from me to Rosalie.

“No, not physically. But she was able to see it. She could see where Rosalie went. She used her powers to move the air to try to harm Kacidra and Shelly. It was a

trick, and I fell for it. I shifted because I thought I’d be strong enough to stop her. I gave up my hold on the dream. I surrendered to her without realizing it.”

“She overpowered you,” Ethan repeated, as though to himself.

“Yes. She did.”

“What happened next?” Ethan stood, crossing his arms as his gaze moved over me, settling on the side of my face as I turned to look at Rowan.

“I tried to go back in,” Rosalie said. “She was in the temple in her wolf form. I don’t think she even knew I was there, next to her. All I had to do was touch her. But when I did I... I was praying. I asked the Goddess for help, like I had during that battle long ago... I didn’t think,”

Ethan looked shocked, his brow furrowing as his cheeks began to color. “You did what?”

“I summoned her powers, Ethan. To save Hanna.”

I felt the floor drop beneath my feet. I didn’t remember what had happened after I shifted. I remember lunging to ward Tasia, and then everything went black. I was stuck in darkness for what felt like a split second, and also an eternity.

“You sacrificed yourself for her—” Ethan said, his voice edged with fury.

“Of course, I did! Do you see what we’re dealing with now, Ethan?” Rosalie stood, wobbling as she gripped the headboard for support.

Ethan started forward, concern lining his face, but she held her hand up to stop him.

“I got rid of Tasia, for now. She wanted me, Ethan. Not Hanna. She was curious about her; she mentioned she had never come across another Dream Dancer. But when she saw me, saw my hair, put the pieces together... I was the one she wanted. And this isn’t done.”

“We don’t know who she is, Mom,” Rowan said as he began to cross the room.

I was focused on Ethan, however, watching the emotions pass across his face. He was staring at Rosalie, hurt lingering behind his eyes. Something that had been buried there for a long, long time.

“This woman is the threat. Not Damian.” Rosalie concluded, letting go of the headboard and standing on her own, unsupported.

“You don’t have your powers anymore, do you?” I asked

her, turning my head to look at her.

She inhaled, shaking her head. “They’re gone.”

“Mine too,” I whispered, secretly relieved. I hadn’t dreamt in a week. I wanted it to stay that way.

“Gemma brought me back to life with a necklace Seraphine left for her. A moonstone,” she pointed to the jewelry box on the dresser. “She used my blood to activate it, exactly like I had done with the Moonlight Lily. It’s the only reason I’m alive right now.”

Ethan was standing in silence, his gaze on the floor. He looked up, shifting his gaze from person to person, settling it on Rowan, who had just sat down next to me, taking my hand.

Ethan had just opened his mouth to speak when the sound of the front door opening and closing caught his attention. “Rowan, did you not lock the door behind Hanna?”

Rowan stood up and moved toward the door to the bedroom, but not fast enough to stop Talon from entering the room in a rush, his face flushed and sweat dampening the hair around his temples.

“It’s Gemma-the baby-Rosalie, she needs you-“

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 299

Chapter 79: George

Ernest

“GET OUT!” Gemma roared as she stood bent over the bed, her hair wet with sweat and matted to the sides of her face. Rowan backed through the doorway, tripping over Ethan, who caught him before Rowan could fall flat on his ass in the hallway of the medical clinic. Ethan was wide eyed, stealing a single glance at Rosalie before he dragged Rowan out of sight.

Dad was right behind them, but he stopped before shutting the door, giving me a soft, emotional smile. I nodded, smiling back, just as Gemma roared

again, this time screaming “F*CK!” loud enough for the glass panes in the window to tremble.

Rosalie was at her side, her arms coming around Gem ma’s shoulders. She was whispering in Gemma’s ear, and Gemma was shaking her head, beads of sweat rolling down her forehead.

Rosalie looked at the midwife, who was busy talking to my mom in the corner of the room as they folded towels. When Rosalie failed to get their attention, she moved her gaze to me. She slowly left Gemma’s side and glided across the room, dressed in a nightgown and robe.

“Talon made it seem like it was an emergency. Is she al right?”

“She’s fine,” I said a little too loudly. Gemma snapped her head in my direction, her eyes narrowed into slits. “She’ s doing a great job!” | paled as Gemma’s lip trembled, fury flashing behind her eyes.

“Easy for you to say. It must be nice-ow!” She bent her head toward the bed, rocking her hips from side to side.

“I’m terrified,” I leaned into Rosalie, whispering discreet ly into her ear.

“Don’t be, she’s going to be fine,”

“No, for myself,” | admitted, swallowing hard. “She wants to kill me. I can see it in her eyes.”

Rosalie arched her brow as she stifled a laugh.

“It won’t be long now,” the midwife said as she passed by with a stack of towels in her hands, setting them down on a table on the side of the room.

It was a cozy space with soft yellow walls and cream colored vinyl flooring. It looked more like a bedroom than a hospital room, but the midwife and her assistant had ex plained the reasoning for that during one of Gemma’s re

cent appointments. It was meant to make the patient feel more at home, calmer, and it seemed to prove successful

especially during births.

Winter Forest had had a baby boom over the past decade, and the midwife had delivered almost every single one in this village.

But despite the warm ambiance of the room, vases full of flowers, and a barrage of women tending to Gemma's every whim, she was struggling.

Her water had broken only an hour ago, and the situation escalated rapidly from there. I had to carry her to the clinic, and she nearly skinned me alive with her fingernails during the short walk from her mother's house along the shoreline. She had broken the skin in a few places where she gripped my arm for dear life, but I knew it paled in comparison to what she was feeling now.

"I'm done; I don't want to do this anymore. I changed my mind. Ernest, I want to go home now!" She pleaded, reaching up to wipe her nose. Her face was stained with tears. I wanted to take her home. I would do anything she asked if it would take the pain away. But that wasn't an option.

I stepped past Rosalie and went to Gemma's side, where I sat on the edge of the bed and held onto her arms as another ripping contraction swept over her body.

Rosalie and the midwife were watching her carefully. I could see a moment of recognition pass behind Rosalie's eyes, which was quickly replaced by relief as Gemma came out of the contraction and caught her breath.

"She didn't talk through that one," the midwife said to Mom as she made a note of the time on her clipboard before hanging it back up on the wall. She moved toward the sink and began to thoroughly wash her hands.

"Gemma, I think it's time," I said gently, tucking her hair behind her ears as she rocked back and forth, holding onto my shoulders.

"Just cut it out. Put me under!"

"It's too late for that now, sweetheart. This baby was ready to go!"

The midwife had donned gloves with the help of her assistant and was moving toward Gemma. Gemma saw her and tensed, her eyes meeting mine and giving me a look of utter terror.

"You're doing great, Gem."

“I want to go home – oh, Goddess, please, help!” She pressed her head against my shoulder, straining with all her might. I wasn’t totally sure what to do now, so I sat there

like an idiot, petting her as though she was a cat. We had taken a birth class with the midwife, but it had been a calm experience. This felt like... war.

“Ernest, honey, let’s get her on the bed,” Rosalie was at my side in an instant, her hands gently running down the length of Gemma’s arms as she began to coax her onto the bed.

Mom was standing on the other side of the bed looking absolutely ecstatic as she beamed down at Gemma, who was purple in the face and grimacing.

“Are you ready to have this baby?” The midwife positioned herself between Gemma’s legs, smiling up at her over the tight swell of her stomach.

“No!” Gemma cried, and I felt tears welling in my own eyes.

I looked across the bed at my mom, who had taken one of Gemma’s hands and was leaning down to whisper encouragements to her. Rosalie placed her hand on my back, patting it gently before she took Gemma’s knee and held it in the crook of her shoulder.

I took Gemma’s hand. “You got this, Gemma.”

I didn’t take my eyes off of her. I felt like everything!

had ever done in my life had led to this very moment. I had spent every waking moment of the last nine months wondering how I would ever deserve her. She was so strong, so incredibly intelligent and all around perfect in every way. And now she was having my child.

I don’t know how much time passed. I don’t remember the words I said to her as she brought our child into the world. I only remember the feeling of her hand in mine, and how the tension abruptly left her body as the tell-tale wail of an infant filled the room.

They placed him on her chest, his knees reflexively tucked into his belly like he had been in the womb. Gemma was sobbing, and Rosalie was stroking her hair. Mom looked a little pale, but the wide smile stretched across her face was undeniable.

I reached out, my hand shaking as I laid it over his head. His head fit in the palm of my hand, his fine, jet-black hair soft against my skin.

I couldn't believe it.

I felt at that moment that I must have been dreaming. It felt like only yesterday I had carried Gemma out of the castle and laid her down in the clearing, thinking her lifeless. Gone.

I thought I'd never have this moment with her.

But suddenly, the boy was in my arms, wrapped in a thick blanket, a silly little blue hat on his head. He felt heavy in my arms despite his size. I didn't realize Rosalie had guided me into a chair until I looked up, seeing Gemma looking down at me from the bed, her face damp from sweat and pinkened with exertion.

But she was smiling, tears rolling down her cheeks. ”

“I love you so much,” I said to her, my voice catching in my throat.

Her eyes creased with pleasure.

“Does he have a name yet? It's been two weeks.” Ethan walked into the living room carrying a round of beers in his arms, passing them around.

It felt snug in the small house, but there was something magical about seeing the family congregate around Gemma as she held our son in her arms, sitting in a high backed chair next to the window overlooking the inlet. This was the house she grew up in, and we had brought our son home to it. We had joked that we'd find a way to take the whole house back with us when we inevitably moved back to Mirage.

“Well,” Gemma smiled at me, patting the baby on the bottom as he slept, his chubby face nestled in the crook of her elbow. “We finally decided on one.”

“Oh? Well, tell us!” Mom was absolutely giddy about being a grandmother, despite her jokes about being far too young for such a role.

Gemma rose from her chair and placed the baby into Mom's arms, and a flush of pleasure rose into her cheeks. Gemma looked down at the baby, smiling as he opened his mouth in a huge, gummy yawn.

"We're naming him George," I felt my mouth twitch into a smile as I watched my parents' faces. Dad stared at me blankly for a moment as he registered what I had just said. And Mom, well, she started to cry.

"For-For Georgia?" Mom sniffed, her blue eyes shining the afternoon light pouring through the lace curtains behind her.

Gemma nodded, on the verge of tears herself.

Ethan and Rosalie were standing in the corner of the room, Ethan's arm around her shoulder as he watched the scene unfold. He sipped from his beer, giving me a nod, a very Ethan way of saying 'good job' or 'congratulations.'

Gemma sat next to me on the couch, exhaling deeply as I wrapped my arm around her shoulder, and she settled in next to me, her exhausted body melting against mine. "I wish Maeve was here."

"Me too," I replied, stealing a glance at Rosalie. She nodded, smiling weakly as her eyes glazed with moisture. It had been just over seven months since the invasion. Seven months, and not a word about Maeve's whereabouts.

We had exhausted all efforts to locate Troy's ship. Ethan was a mess, of course, but hid his wariness behind his usual mask of calm reserve. His efforts had shifted to building an army of allies across both the east and west, rounding up troops for what would evidently be a war against Poldesse. But months had passed, and Damian had straight up vanished, Poldesse ceasing their operations in the Isles with not so much as a Beta to take Damian's place. No one had caught a glimpse of the Persephone since shortly after the invasion. No one had news.

It was peace time again, but a blanket of unease was suffocating our family. It was Hanna who we turned to for guidance now, her visions of Maeve the only clues we had to her welfare. She had sensed that whatever journey Maeve was on had been destined and interrupting the process would be counterintuitive.

Rosalie had been the one to convince Ethan to listen, to take a step back, despite their concern. We trusted Hanna

because there wasn't much else we could do.

I had been taking short trips to Mirage to oversee the reconstruction of the city, designating Lance as the Alpha in my place whenever I returned to Winter Forest. Gemma and I would have to leave soon, now that George was born.

But returning to normal life felt wrong, in a way. A nagging feeling that the worst was yet to come kept tugging at the back of my mind.

Rowan and Hanna entered, followed by Kacidra, who Gemma had taken a special interest in recently. Kacidra had been coming over to help with the baby, holding him and washing his cloth diapers while Gemma took shallow but restorative naps. They rarely said a word to each other, but a bond had formed, nonetheless.

I looked over my shoulder out the window, peering through the curtains at the inlet as the water lapped against the shore. It was lightly snowing, the sky a pale gray.

Ice would cover the inlet in a few short weeks.

I looked at Ethan, who had also been looking out the window, and I knew what he was thinking.

If Maeve didn't come home soon, who knew how long it would be until we saw her again?

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 300

Chapter 80 : Blood in the Snow

Maeve

Snow was falling in thick, heavy sheets as we walked along the dock, our footsteps absorbed into the vacuum of total and complete silence that accompanied such weather. I could barely see the village through the snow, just hints of the multi-colored cabins that were nestled near the shore. The

snow was heavy, sliding from the metal roofs as the cabins warmed within and wood-smoked funneled through chimneys.

My steps felt unsteady as I walked, not used to being on solid ground after five weeks at sea. The journey took longer than we expected, having met bad weather as we passed through the Isles and various challenges with the boat as we crept through the ice filled water of the north-eastern coastline. There had been a few times we had almost given up, debating whether to turn west and seek refuge in Breles, unsure of what awaited us if we stayed east and landed in Valoria.

But none of that mattered anymore.

I was home.

I stopped at the edge of the dock where the wide-plank floorboards met the rocky trail leading back to the village. I remember stopping here before, but on the other side, looking out over the port at the seaplane idling on the water, waiting to take me to Mirage, to my destiny

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Would I have still gone if I knew what was in store for me?

Troy had said something to me, but his words vanished into the snow. I looked up, seeing a darkened figure standing on the bluff just above the port. I immediately knew it was my dad.

Troy fell behind as I walked forward, the snow piling around my ankles as I trudged up the slope leading into the village. I watched my feet, unsure of what to do or say when I faced him. I knew Dad was matching my pace. He always had. He had never let me get too far ahead of him or fall too far behind.

He was waiting for me at the top of the slope where the gravel road began. I could just make out his face in the dim light cast by the porch lights of the nearby cabins. His hair was wild, much longer than when I had last seen him. Snowflakes were sticking to his beard and eyelashes. His face was expressionless.

“Hi, Dad,” I said softly, biting the inside of my lower lip. I didn’t realize I had my arms wrapped beneath my belly before I felt a wave of shame wash over me,

causing me to tuck my chilled fingers into the pockets of the oversized wool coat I was wearing.

“Hey, kid,” he breathed, and the briefest hint of a smile touched his cheek and was gone before I could even blink.

I stared at him, my mouth opening and closing as I tried to will myself to speak. He tilted his head, his eyes creasing against the silent tears welling in the corners of his eyes. “Where’ve you been? It’s been a long time”

I ran to him, throwing my arms around him as he curled his body around mine, locking me in a warm embrace. I didn’t try to stifle the sobs as I broke down, clinging to his jacket so hard my nails left marks in the leather

“It’s okay,” he said into my hair, resting his cheek against the top of my head. “It’s fine. You’re home now.”

“I’m home,” I mumbled against his jacket, the words barely audible, “Where’s Mom?”

“She is at the house, asleep.”

“Oh,” I said weakly, a fresh wave of my tears soaking into his jacket as I pressed my face against his chest. She was alive. She was still alive.

“We need to talk about-” Dad paused, his body going rigid with tension

I squeezed him harder, knowing he had spotted Troy, who had likely just reached the top of the slope and was in full view of Dad. I turned my head to look over my shoulder at Troy, giving him a weak smile. He gave me one of his signature crooked smiles, but then he shifted his gaze toward the road, his brow furrowing as he began to slowly lower our bags onto the ground.

I peeked over Dad’s arm just in time to witness a blurred figure sprint by, stopping in front of Troy in a spray of snow, his hands clenched into fists at his sides.

“You get one shot,” Troy said slowly, letting go of our bags and straightening to his full height. “Because I deserve it.”

Rowan wound his arm back and punched Troy cleanly in the jaw. Troy shook his head, spitting blood into the snow before looking back up at Rowan. He

caught Rowan's hand in his as Rowan attempted to swing at him again, and arched his brow. "I said one!"

"Troy!" I squeaked, but Dad promptly shushed me, an odd look in his eyes as he watched Troy and Rowan start to beat the living hell out of each other in the middle of the road.

"You have a lot of explaining to do, Maeve," Dad said, continuing to watch the fight. He grimaced when Rowan reared back and headbutted Troy in the nose, and then arched his brow, slightly impressed, when Troy put Rowan in a headlock in return, forcing Rowan to his knees.

"You're enjoying this," I hissed, trying to free myself from his embrace.

He chuckled silently, his chest vibrating as he loosened his grip on me.

"This is really the guy, then?"

"I love him," I said bluntly and with enough force to draw Dad's attention away from the fight.

He stared at me, searching my eyes for understanding. "I know," he replied, his voice soft and calm against the sounds of Troy and Rowan fighting in the background of what could have been a sweet father daughter moment.

I turned away from Dad to glare at the two idiots behind me, losing my patience. "We get it, you're very strong and manly!" I snapped.

Troy was flat on his back, his leg wrapped around one of Rowan's and his arms pinning Rowan's arms to his side. Troy had taught me that move, something he called a sweep, and I knew he was only moments away from flipping Rowan onto his stomach and holding him down until he tapped out.

Troy immediately released Rowan from his hold on him at my words and my dad's steely gaze, but Rowan used that to his advantage, turning on Troy and continuing the match.

"They're enjoying themselves," Dad said beneath his breath, tilting his head as he watched them continue to roll through the snow and murmur curses. "I used to be young once, you know. I used to do... whatever it is they're doing."

Rowan had met his physical match in Troy, and had resorted to throwing snowballs to ward off any further attacks, one of them hitting Troy squarely in the chest where his wound was. I flinched as I watched Troy double over, holding his hand out in momentary surrender. It had healed well over the past several weeks, but was still tender

“Are you mad at me?” I asked Dad, not daring to look at him.

He was still for a moment, then shrugged, shaking his head as he rested his chin on the top of my head. “There’s nothing to be mad about. Are you upset with me, though?”

“Why would I be upset with you?”

“I didn’t find you.”

I didn’t know what to say. I could hear the hurt in his voice as he spoke, and my eyes began to water as I turned my focus back on Troy and Rowan, who were, of course, back to throwing punches, although it was obvious they were beginning to tire.

I almost said I hadn’t wanted him to find me, spilling my long-held anxieties about the idea of him, and Mom, falling into Damian’s trap. I swallowed my words, resting my head against his arm as we watched Troy and Rowan. I shifted my gaze to the side, catching Pete out of the corner of my eye. He was standing still with his backpack sliding off of his shoulder and onto his arm.

He dropped it into the snow as he took a single step toward the blonde woman standing in front of him, facing him. She was wearing nothing but a plush bathrobe and flannel pajama pants, her hair knotted in a loose bun on the top of her head, ruffled from sleep. Pete took her hand.

“How is this possible?” I whispered to myself, watching them with interest. We had been in Winter Forest for ten whole minutes and Pete had found his mate.

“You’re shivering,” Dad said as he wound his arm around my shoulder and turned me toward the village, our house in the distance blanketed in snow and perched on the hill overlooking the village. “Let’s go home.”

“Okay,” I replied, too overwhelmed to argue that we should break Rowan and Troy up first.

We walked past Pete and the blonde woman, and I couldn't help but stare. Neither of them looked at us as we passed by, but I recognized her-Kacidra, Aaron's twin sister, who I had only met the one time their family had visited Winter Forest ten years ago. I opened my mouth to ask Dad what she was doing here but was interrupted by Dad's voice drifting through the chilled, snowy air.

"There's a lot we need to discuss."

"I-I know."

"Something happened while you were gone,"

"It was Mom, wasn't it?"

Dad was silent, but his arm was still resting over my shoulders as we walked, his hand squeezing my arm in response to my question.

He would've told me if she were dead. Dad wouldn't lie to me and tell me she was sleeping if she was dead. Rowan's focus wouldn't have been on Troy. He wouldn't have even cared about Troy if Mom had died while I was away.

We were nearing the house, the gates to the compound just visible as we turned the corner and started walking up the driveway. A light was on in the living room, setting the deck above the garage alight in a safe yellow glow.

I felt like I was just here, like I had just been standing beneath the shelter of the deck while the first spring rain pounded against the floorboards above my head, going over the proposal my Dad had pitched to me only moments before. Go to Mirage. Give the pack of Drogomor an heir. Rule as Luna.

Be a mother.

I stopped walking just as we reached the gate, unable to step forward. Dad removed his arm, turning to me.

"Alpha Damian is dead," I said without thinking, staring blankly at the woodgrain on the garage door.

"How?"

"A friend of mine killed him. When we were... it doesn't matter."

“We don’t have to talk about it right now. It’s the middle of the night.”

A silence passed between us as I continued to stare forward, feeling lightheaded. “Okay”

“Come inside, Maeve. Sleep. Sleep in your own bed.” Dad shuffled his feet, crossing his arms over his chest as he looked up at the living room. “I’ll tell your mom you’re home in the morning.”

“Is she hurt?”

“Yes.”

I looked at the ground and reached up to wipe my nose on my jacket sleeve. “How badly?”

“Maeve, please”

“Maeve?”

I looked up as a figure stepped out of the garage, her face shadowed by the deck above her head. I took one cautious step towards the gate, my hands trembling as I reached up to push it open.

“Ge-Gemma?”

Gemma reached along the wall on the side of the house and flipped the switch, flooding the driveway in light. I almost passed out, my vision going blurry as I swayed, Dad catching me before my knees buckled.

“Goddess, Maeve, are you alright?” Gemma came forward, patting a bundle of blankets against her shoulder.

I gasped, thinking I was going to pass out a second time as I clung to my dad for support

“I told you we have a lot to discuss,” Dad grunted as he put his arm around me, practically dragging me through the gate as I gaped at Gemma.

Gemma smiled at me, her eyes shining with tears.

“You were pregnant?!” I cried over Dad’s shoulder as he took me

through the side door next to the garage that Gemma had come out of.

Tears were rolling down her cheeks as her mouth stretched into a desperate, disbelieving smile, nodding her head as she followed us inside, her baby starting to fuss as she shifted the bundle in her arms.

“Is Troy with you?” she asked, her voice filled with longing.

“He’s wrestling with Rowan in the village,” I panted as Dad tried to coax me up the stairs.

He was growing frustrated and turned to Gemma, giving her a cold look.

“Maeve, I already told you once,”

“I can’t believe you’re here. All-all this time we thought,” I stammered.

“Ernest is here too, Maeve. We both got out. I have so much to tell you!”

“That’s enough, both of you!”

“Dad, just-”

I heard footsteps in the house above us as Dad guided me up the stairs, his hand pushing gently on my lower back. I was already in shock, but it was amplified by the voices of Aunt Georgia and Aunt Vicky chattering in the hallway, their voices lifted in surprise.

LU

Suddenly, I was surrounded by family, people that at several points during the past months I thought I would never see again. I barely had time to catch my breath before Georgia had me out of my coat, and Vicky was fussing over me, fluffing the snow from my hair with tears in her eyes as Georgia took my hands, turning them over in her own as they inspected me fully.

“Does Rosalie know?” Gemma’s voice cut through the fray, and I turned my head toward her, catching a glimpse of the infant resting in her arms. He was dressed in a soft blue onesie, his chubby fist stuffed into his perfect mouth. I burst into tears.

“Leave her alone, everyone-Georgia, stop! She needs to go to bed—” Dad was struggling against the crowd that was surrounding us, which had grown

by three as my cousins had been roused from sleep, their blonde curls lopsided and full of static.

“Ethan? What’s going on?”

Everyone stopped moving and the hallway was bathed in silence. Kat, my youngest cousin, tugged on Vicky’s sleeve, rubbing her eyes as Vicky quietly scooped the young girl into her arms.

I walked between Dad and Georgia as though in slow motion, entering the main foyer and turning to look up the staircase that led to the second floor. Mom was standing at the top of the stairs, leaning against the railing for support.

“Is it really you?” she said, her voice trembling.

I opened my mouth to reply, choked from tears, just as Dad walked past me and began to walk up the stairs.

“Rosalie, this has to wait-”

“Maeve? Are you really here?”

“I’m here, Mama.” I said, my voice shaking as I began to crumble.

The conversations had started up again the hallway outside the door to the stairway to the garage as Rowan entered the house, tossing our bags into the foyer as he argued with Gemma and Troy, who were fielding an onslaught of questions from Georgia and Vicky

I looked back up at Mom, shaking my head in disbelief.

“I’m home.”

Next Chapter Coming Soon...

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 301

Chapter 81 : The Moonstone Sinks into the Ocean

Maeve

Gemma was sitting at the kitchen island, pouring a hefty amount of cream into her coffee. She stirred in two spoonfuls of sugar before setting the spoon down and lifting the mug to her lips.

I was standing near the sink, the carafe of coffee in my hand as I prepared to pour myself a mug. It had been a long night with little sleep. Dad had finally gotten me into my bed, tucking me in without even giving me an opportunity to take my boots and coat off, acting like if he didn't get me into bed and tuck me in like he used to when I was girl, I would disappear right before his eyes, like a dream.

I hadn't even had a chance to talk to Mom. He had made her go back to bed before I even reached the top of the stairs.

Mom was always the first one awake in the mornings. I thought I'd

see her in the kitchen, making coffee. Instead, I made it myself, alone, until Gemma came in from where she had slept on the couch in the den.

"Is everyone staying in the house? The whole family?" I asked her as I poured a small cup of coffee. Cleo had been wary of the fact still preferred coffee over tea, saying something about the effects of caffeine during pregnancy, but I hadn't listened.

Coffee in the morning was my ritual. I wasn't the same without it. I did try to make it a bit weaker than I had before my pregnancy.

"Oh, not. Not usually. Talon and Ernest are in Mirage, so Georgia

wanted me to stay here instead of at home, so I wouldn't be taking care of George all alone. Vicky's girls wanted to put on a talent show for us last night, and it got late, so they stayed over. I don't think they like staying in the castle, it's more fun over here."

"I've missed a lot, haven't I?" I couldn't hide the hurt in my voice as I sat down on the stool across from her, reaching for the bottle of cream. She slid the sugar bowl toward me, smiling somberly.

"You missed a lot of drama, that's for sure. But you're here now; that's all that matters."

“Do you know where Troy is?” I hadn’t spoken to him since we left the ship, and Dad had shut me in my room, where Troy hadn’t joined me. Gemma pursed her lips, sighing deeply.

“Rowan made him sleep in the garage.”

“What? Why?”

“Because your dad wouldn’t let Rowan lock him out of the house entirely. I saw the three of them leaving the house early this morning when Georgia came into get George so I could sleep a little longer.”

Gemma didn’t seem concerned, but I was reeling. She noticed this and shook her head, sipping from her coffee. “They’re not going to kill him, Maeve.”

“Are you sure? Rowan and Troy beat each other up pretty good last night.”

“Well, based on what Rowan’s face looked like this morning, I would say Troy was the winner, huh?” Her eyes twinkled with mirth as she set her mug down, turning it in a circle.

I heard footsteps in the foyer, and Georgia appeared, carrying George against her shoulder. He was roughly two months old and very active, squirming and chomping down on her shoulder.

“He’s trying to eat me,” she laughed, handing him to Gemma and running her finger along his cheek and tickling him under the two sets of rolls beneath his chin.

He grinned, his dark blue eyes creasing up at his grandmother. “And I said I have nothing for him. That time for me has passed!” Georgia said in a goofy voice that George seemed to love. He cooed and squealed, then promptly turned his head toward Gemma’s chest, rooting with vigor.

“Oh, he’d try. Trust me. Ernest had to start sleeping with a shirt on because George got him once when he was sleeping between us. I think it scared Ernest to death, he wasn’t expecting it.”

“Ah, men and their useless nipples.” Georgia kissed Gemma on the top of the head as she passed by, heading toward the den. She stopped to squeeze my

shoulder and kiss me on the cheek, unusual behavior on Georgia's part who I had always considered the crazy aunt who had taught us bad words and encouraged us to be naughty in front of our parents.

"When will Mom be up?" I asked Gemma, turning to face her. Gemma was fumbling with the buttons of her flannel shirt, making shushing sounds to George as he began to fuss.

"She sleeps late now. It's been hard for her since... well, Ethan told me I couldn't say anything to you, Maeve. I'm sorry."

"Why not?"

"Because it's something you have to talk about with your mom. He said it... wasn't my business. He's been a real crab lately."

"Something bad happened, didn't it?"

"Yeah... it was bad. But" She looked into my eyes, sighing. "Do you remember my necklace? The one my mother left me. You saw it once in Mirage, you mentioned it"

"Yeah, I remember..." A chill ran up my spine, picturing the dainty necklace in my mind.

"Well, it has powers,"

I stumbled out of the chair, spilling my coffee. George unlatched from Gemma and twisted his face into a grimace, surprised by the noise. He wailed, clenching his tiny fists.

"Maeve! What's the matter?"

I was already sprinting through the house, sliding to a stop in front of the front door. I pulled one of Rowan's coats on and slipped my feet into a pair of my dad's rubber boots that were sitting by the door before I ran outside.

I slowed on the stairs, careful not to slip, but started running again once I hit the driveway, one arm cradling my huge stomach as I ran through the gate and down the snow-covered road.

The cruiser was docked at the port, covered in snow. Duck was running through the snow on the dock, playfully barking as he pounced, sticking his long snout into the snowdrifts sneezing, thoroughly enjoying himself. "Duck!" I called to him, breathing heavy as I skidded to a stop on the slippery planks of the dock. Duck barked at me in reply, his tail wagging.

Dad walked onto the upper deck of the cruiser, crossing his arms

over his chest as he looked down at me. "What the hell are you doing out here in your pajamas, Maeve? It's freezing."

"Where's Troy?" I said in a strained voice, struggling to catch my breath. I was very much looking forward to not carrying around an extra sixty or seventy pounds when this pregnancy was over.

Troy walked up to the railing, and I sighed with relief, leaning forward with my hands on my knees.

"What's wrong?" he asked, his voice brimming with concern.

"G-Gemma has the other moonstone-" | cried, looking back up at them. It had started to snow again, fine flakes that fell in a dizzying pattern. It was more like the flakes were suspended in the air, and I was suddenly dizzy, unable to differentiate the sky from the ground. It was all the same color.

I sat in the snow with a crunch, and both Troy and Dad ran from the deck and were at my side in a matter of seconds.

"She was wearing it the night she died. I was trying to help her when Ernest was carrying her out of the castle, and he pushed me away. My hand grazed her chest, I felt the necklace on my hand. It-it stung me. I remember,"

My vision blurred, and suddenly I was flat on my back, Dad and Troy leaning over me with their faces darkened with concern.

"We have to get her back to the house-" they said in unison, and then they stared at each other.

"Where's the other moonstone?!" I snapped in frustration, stuck on my back like an upside-down turtle.

"It's in the safe on the boat-" Troy stammered.

“Go get it!” I started to rock back and forth, trying to get over onto my side, but Dad stopped me, grabbing me by the armpits as he lifted me upright onto my feet.

“You need to calm down,” he said sternly, brushing snow from my coat. “Go back up to the house right now,”

“You don’t understand!”

“Why are you wearing my coat?” Rowan was walking up to us, glaring at me.

“Nice to see you too, idiot!” I hissed. Rowan dramatically put his hand over his heart, pretending he was going to faint in a dramatic way.

“Nice of you to finally show up, Maeve. How was your vacation?” He hadn’t had a chance to rouse me the night before because he was too busy trying to beat up my mate.

“Shut-”

“That’s enough!” Dad grabbed me roughly by the arm and began walking me across the dock towards the road.

“I got it! I got it-” Troy was walking briskly forward, holding the moonstone up in the air. I turned, making Dad come to an abrupt stop. Duck was barking at him, baring his death.

Duck yelped when Dad bared his teeth back and took off down the dock toward Troy, but slipped, sliding on his side into Rowan, causing Rowan’s knees to buckle.

Rowan lost his balance and grabbed onto Troy’s arm, and the two of them fell off the dock into the swallow, icy water.

“For Goddess’s sake,” Dad hissed as he let go of my arm and

stalked towards the dock, where Troy and Rowan had come back to the surface of the water, gasping in shock from the cold.

“Get out of the water! What is wrong with you kids-” Dad grabbed Rowan by the collar of his jacket and lifted him onto the dock while Troy gripped the dock with his fingers, his teeth chattering. Dad reached down to help, but Troy suddenly let go of the dock.

“I dropped it! Oh, shit. I dropped-” he sucked in his breath and disappeared below the surface of the water again.

“Troy!” | screeched, his name drowned out by the massive splash of water that washed over the deck as Rowan jumped in after Troy, the spray coating Dad in icy, gray liquid. He threw his hands up in surrender and walked toward me, shaking the water off of his coat.

“Aren’t you going to help them?” I said in disbelief.

Dad shook his head, pointing up to the house. “Go, come on.”

“Dad!” I protested, but then saw their heads pop back up on the surface, Troy holding the moonstone in his hand. They laughed as they started to swim toward the shore.

“I think they like each other,” I said as I started to walk forward to catch up to Dad, who was walking briskly in front of me, taking long strides.

It took a few seconds to catch up to him, and I was breathing heavily again, grabbing onto his jacket to try to slow him down.

“What were you guys doing this morning?” I asked.

“Meeting the prisoner... again,” he said shortly, talking about Opaline. I hadn’t even thought of her since we’d reached Winter Forest.

“Did you”

“Do you realize who he is, Maeve? Where he comes from?”

“Troy?” I was confused. Opaline was a she....

“Yes. Troy.” He appeared to be angry and frustrated as he looked down at me. I squared my shoulders. I had been preparing for this moment for months.

“Troy is a good man. He’s saved my life, countless times!”

“He is Romero’s grandson-”

“He never knew his family. None of them. He’s been on his own since he was four years old!” I cried, my voice breaking with emotion.

“He’s Maddalyn’s son!”

“That mean’s nothing to me! I never knew about her; you told me nothing about,”

“Oh, I did. But you never paid attention!”

“That’s not true. You and Mom only told me what you thought | needed to know—”

“Because we never thought you’d be in this situation, Maeve!”

“He is my *MATE!*” I cried.

It was the first time I had ever said the words and meant them. I started to cry as I unbuttoned the top of my coat, roughly pulling the fabric down to show him Troy’s mark on my neck. Dad blinked, then his face flushed with fury.

“Go. Inside. Right now!”

“I’m not a kid anymore, Dad,” I mumbled as I pushed past him, waddling up the road with my chilled fingers folding into fists at my sides.

I could feel his eyes on me as I walked away, and my tears were cool against my skin, sticking to my face in the bitter cold.

I reached the house and struggled on the stairs, cursing under my breath as my stomach tightened into one of those fake, practice contractions Cleo had told me about. I had five weeks until my due date, and the contractions had become more regular. Not painful, but annoying, and tended to be more frequent whenever I was stressed or upset.

Once inside, I sniffled as I fought to free my arms from the coat. I hung it up on the hook, which was fastened to the wall along a lengthy piece of wood that made up the coat rack. I was too rough, and the entire rack came off the wall, landing on my toes.

“F*ck!” I cried, unable to bend over to rub my foot because my stomach was in the way.

“Maeve? Are you alright?” Mom was standing in the hallway, holding a cup of tea in her hand. She looked extremely fatigued as she came to my side, rail thin, her hair limp and pulled away from her face. She was a shell of herself! ||

“No!” I howled, bursting into tears.

She put her arms around me and held me for a moment as I cried against her shoulder.

“I love you,” she whispered, kissing me lightly on the cheek. “I missed you. I was looking for you just now, but Gemma said you’d

gone to look for your Dad...” She turned me to the stairs and led me into her bedroom.

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 302

Chapter 82: The Two Stones

Maeve

Mom patted the bed, inviting me to lay next to her.

I wiped the tears from my face before turning down the thick covers, sliding into bed beside her. She was in a sitting position, holding the cup of tea in her lap as she looked over at me, taking me in.

“You’ve changed a lot,” she said with a smile, reaching out to tuck my hair behind my ears. “You’re very tan. And I’ve never seen your hair quite this light-”

“You can mention I weigh a million pounds now. It wouldn’t hurt my feelings.”

She rolled her eyes and sipped her tea. “You look beautiful, Maeve. Healthy.”

“I don’t want to be pregnant anymore,” I whimpered as I buried my face in the pillow.

“Well, by the looks of it, it could be over any day now,”

“Five more weeks...” I grimaced as one of the babies kicked me firmly in the ribs.

“Five? But-”

I pulled the covers over my head. “I’m having twins.”

“Oh,” Mom said, unable to hide the joy in her voice. “Well,

sometimes twins come early. We’ve had a few sets born in the village. Remember when the triplets were born a few years ago? That was quite a feat-”

“Mrs. Abrams was miserable, Mom. I’m sure she still is-”

“I saw her a few days ago at the market, sweetheart. She seemed happy, just... a little frazzled.” She set her teacup down on the bedside table with a clang, and then reached over to stroke my side. “You’re going to suffocate under there.”

I pushed the covers away, my face twisted in hurt. “Dad hates me.”

“He doesn’t hate you!”

“I’m pregnant with his arch nemesis’s grandchild, Mom!”

“Arch nemesis?”

“Maddalyn! He’s so, so mad at me. I’m surprised he hasn’t killed Troy.”

“We definitely discussed it,” she laughed, her eyes creasing with mirth.

I arched my brow. “Last night? I figured Troy told him who he was this morning,”

“We’ve known for a while, honey. Ernest brought Troy’s sketchbook back from the castle. The one of Maddalyn is... impossible to deny. Dad told me he looks like her, too. He must be beautiful.” There was pain in her voice when she said the last part.

“What did Maddalyn do, exactly?”

Mom exhaled, then laughed softly, shaking her head. “I don’t know where to begin!”

“The beginning would be fine.”

“Hmm... well, Maddalyn came into my life before... I was still a breeder then. She was unhappy with the arraignment. Your father and Maddalyn were

betrothed; at least that's what Romero and King James had wanted. She was cruel to me in those days, before the war. Just... a mean girl, not yet a villain."

"Does it bother you that Troy looks like her?"

"Well, I haven't met him yet, Maeve. But no, from what Ernest and Gemma have told us, it sounds like Troy is nothing like his parents. I won't deny that Maddalyn was beautiful. She was. She truly was. Just not on the inside."

"He wasn't raised by her. He doesn't know her at all."

"I gathered that from what Ernest knew about Troy's relationship with Romero."

Thank the Goddess for Ernest. He had saved me from having to explain everything that had happened before the invasion.

"Your dad isn't going to kill Troy. But he will be asking questions. I heard Rowan tried to fight him,"

"Keyword: tried. They both beat the crap out of one another," I said bluntly. "Rowan hates me too, Mom. He didn't even say hi to me when I arrived last night."

"Rowan is going through something very complicated right now, honey."

"What is it?" I asked with interest.

Her mouth twitched into a smile, but then she looked away. "He found his mate, and... Hanna is wonderful. I like her a lot. But she

has... powers."

"Wait, Hanna of Red Lakes? Is that why Kacidra is here?"

"Yes."

"And Hanna is like... you?"

"No..."

"Then what can she do?"

“She dreams. I don’t really know how to explain-”

If I had been physically capable of jumping to my feet without struggling to get out of the bed, I would have. “She’s a Dream Dancer?”

“How do you know what that is?”

“Oh, Goddess,” I sighed, rolling over onto my back. “This is going to be a very long story, Mom.”

“So, you felt it when I... when I lost my powers?” she asked.

It had taken me over two hours to tell her everything. I recounted every detail from the moment I met Troy to the second I stepped off the boat in Winter Forest, leaving a few spicier things that happened between Troy and me out, of course.

I was sitting up in bed now, resting a sandwich Gretchen had brought up for me on the swell of my stomach. “And... the moonstone we found in the tomb, I used it to bring Troy back to life, like Gemma used her moonstone on you.”

“And the people of... Dianny? Is that what that pack is called?”

“Dianny is their city, The Sisters of Artemis is their pack.”

“I see. I think I understand. They think... bringing the stones together is,”

“Una wasn’t sure what would happen.” I swallowed, looking down at the sandwich. “But I think we’re supposed to be the ones to do it. Tasia wants them, though. I don’t know what for.”

“She wants to end the White Queens; at least that’s what Hanna and I think.” Mom had told me what happened to her and Hanna, how Tasia had come through the dream and wrecked the temple.

The pieces were falling into place, and I felt suddenly at peace. We had made it this far, overcome so much. I was looking forward to just being home for a moment.

But then the door to the bedroom opened.

Dad walked into the room, his eyes downcast as he moved to the end of the bed and stopped, his arms crossed over his chest.

“I owe you an apology,” he said, looking up at me through his lashes.

“Oh? Go on,” I said with a smartass grin.

“Maeve,” Mom said in a warning tone.

Dad glared at me, then cleared his throat. “I’m sorry.”

“For what, exactly?”

Dad sharpened his glare, then glanced at Mom, a silent plea for help in his eyes. She shrugged, smiling at him, clearly enjoying and

having missed our constant bickering.

“For being terse with you for something outside of your control.” He ran his tongue along his lower lip, waiting for my reply.

“I accept your apology,” I said, sitting up a little straighter. “One on condition.”

“No,” he said shortly.

“That Troy is allowed to sleep in my room.”

“Absolutely not.”

“It’s not like he can get me pregnant)” I laughed.

Dad turned bright red. Mom’s eyes widened as she looked down at her lap, trying not to laugh.

“Whatever,” he said, just as Troy knocked on the open door.

The three of us turned to him. Mom gave him a beaming smile, which I don’t think he was expecting. He blushed, taking a step into the room and coming into the light.

He had showered and shaved, and it looked like someone had given him a haircut. Georgia likely got her hands on him, I thought. She always gave

Rowan a haircut whenever she visited, not liking the men in her life with long hair.

Troy looked like he had when I first laid eyes on him. He was rested and at ease, a glimmer of mischief in his eye. I smiled at him, hoping at least one of our children grew to look exactly like him.

He gave mom a slight bow, who was watching him with interest.

“We owe you thanks, Troy, for taking care of our daughter,” she said, sounding every bit like a queen.

“It’s a damn near impossible task-Dad said, but then stopped when Mom’s gaze locked on him. “Thank you,” he said, clearing his throat.

“Uh, you’re welcome.” Troy shifted his weight uncomfortably. “I’m sorry for kidnapping her.”

Mom’s mouth opened in surprise, and Dad flexed his jaw, reaching up to scratch his beard as I exhaled deeply, rolling my eyes. I set the sandwich on the nightstand, attempting to swing my legs out of the bed but struggling. Troy came to my side, glancing at Dad before he took my hand and helped me onto my feet.

“How are you? I haven’t been able to talk to you since we got here.” Troy looked at me with concern.

“I’m fine... just huge. And tired. You don’t have to sleep in the garage again, I promise.”

“Ernest and Talon are on their way back from Mirage; they will arrive in the morning. Troy, we will have a lot to discuss with the two of them regarding your title,” Dad said over the soft murmur of my words to Troy.

Troy froze, his fingers clasp down on my hand. “My title?”

“You’ll be taking your rightful seat as Alpha of Poldesse, after the wedding.”

“The wedding?” Mom and I said in unison.

Dad nodded, tucking his hands behind his back.

“Of course,” Troy said, all business

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I looked at him, searching his eyes for understanding. He'd already said he wasn't going to be Alpha of Poldesse.

"Troy-I began, but Dad cut me off.

"The wedding will take place here, at the house, so your mother can attend. Preferably as soon as possible, before the child arrives."

"It's twins," I said, and Dad was shocked, his eyes going wide. "And why wouldn't Mom be able to attend if we got married somewhere else? The bluff is beautiful in the spring-"

"Because I don't have that long, Maeve." Mom's words seemed to float in the air for a moment before crashing down and suffocating me.

I looked over at her, my stomach tied in a knot. "What?" I managed to whisper.

"I don't have my powers anymore, honey. I should've died a hundred times by now, you know. And I... I'm not strong without them. I was badly hurt when Hanna and I were attacked. The wounds aren't healing..."

"She's getting weaker by the day." Dad's voice broke with emotion, the words catching in his throat.

I gaped at them, my hands shaking as I gripped Troy's hand for dear life. "Where is it?" I whispered, and he reached into his pocket, putting the moonstone into my hand.

"Maeve, wait, we don't know-" Troy warned.

I was already halfway across the room, heading toward Mom's jewelry box. Dad stepped in front of me, trying to stop me, but I

stepped around him and began to rifle through her jewelry.

"Where is it? The necklace?"

"The-in the safe, downstairs," Mom replied.

I turned to Dad, giving him a look that told him exactly what I meant to do. He didn't protest.

"Maeve, listen to me. Una warned us-" Troy tried again.

"She didn't know for sure what would happen, but I saw this, Troy. I knew something was going to happen to her and now... now it has. I have to."

"Listen to him, Maeve!" Mom said sternly. "What if-"

"No! I'm not going to let this continue!"

Troy and Mom were staring at me in shock as I left the room, meeting Dad at the top of the stairs. He gave me the necklace, looking me in the eyes.

“What now?” he asked.

“I need something sharp-”

He pulled out a pocket knife, placing it in my hands. But he grabbed my wrist, holding me tightly. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

11

“Save her?”

“You’re pregnant. There could be consequences. Troy said you weren’t sure what was going to happen.”

“I have to bring them together. It’s the only thing I know I’m supposed to do.”

I turned from him and walked back into the room, shaking as I stood at the end of the bed. I held the moonstones in the palm of one hand, looking at them for a moment before I brought the knife down over the base of my thumb, closing my hand into a fist as I walked over to my mother.

My hand felt warm, the wound throbbing.

And then I felt... nothing.

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 303

Chapter 83 : Common Ground

Troy

Well, I was still alive.

I hadn’t been sure what to expect when we finally reached Maeve’s homeland, but I thought Maeve would have been more at peace.

Instead, I watched her crumble at the edge of her parents' bed, the moonstones in her hands, realizing the act of bringing them together hadn't worked.

That had been the first time I met her mother, the famous White Queen Rosalie... my future mother-in-law, if Ethan didn't kill me before a wedding could take place.

We had been in Winter Forest for a full day at that point, and my conversations with Ethan had been short and to the point. I had turned over Opaline to him. I had returned his daughter to her pack. I had given him a complete report on everything that had happened from the moment I first stepped foot in Valoria to the day our boat pulled into the inlet that hugged the shore of Winters Forest's main village.

Outside of that, he didn't even look in my direction.

I was only slightly embarrassed that I fell off the dock in front of him, but Rowan made me look slightly better than himself when he jumped in a second time to help me get the moonstone before it was carried away by the tide.

The icy, glacial water had been a baptism of some kind, something that cemented an unlikely friendship between Maeve's brother and

1. me.

So, I wasn't entirely surprised when I woke up the next morning to Rowan in the doorway of Maeve's bedroom, peering down at me.

"Why are you sleeping on the floor?" he asked in a whisper, arching his brow.

I ran my fingers through my hair and then over my face, rubbing my eyes. "More room down here," I tilted my head toward the bed where Maeve was still sleeping like a rock with basically all of the pillows in the house tucked around her body. "What time is it?"

"A little after seven," he replied, leaning against the doorway and crossing his arms over his chest. I looked out the window behind the bed, seeing nothing. It was pitch black. "The sun doesn't come up until, like, eleven this time of year. You'll get used to it."

“Oh, yeah. I forgot.” I blinked a few times, my body and mind not yet acclimated to the strangeness of this place. The sun had set the day before at just after 3:00 p.m., and all my body wanted to do was sleep even though I wasn’t particularly tired.

“It’s hard on everyone for a while,” Rowan continued as I stood and folded up the blanket I had been sleeping on. I laid it over Maeve’s feet, which were peeking out of the thick quilt that she had tucked up around her ears. “How’s she doing?”

I could hear the guilt in his voice as his gaze shifted from me to the bed.

In truth, Maeve wasn’t well. She had cried until she fell asleep the night before, spilling her feelings about her homecoming to me while I held her, whispering reassurances against her neck. Maeve was a wreck, and I couldn’t blame her. It was mostly my fault.

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“She’s fine. Tired,” I answered shortly, pulling one of the thick knit sweaters Gretchen had laid out for me over my shoulders. Rowan watched me closely. His eyes were so much like Maeve’s, the same color and shape, in fact. But Rowan looked more like Rosalie in the face, at least in my opinion. He had his father’s jaw, though, which tightened and flexed whenever they held back their words.

“I was hoping she’d be awake, so I could... talk to her. Say hi, I guess.”

“She sleeps until noon most days. It’s a lot... the pregnancy, you know.”

“Uh, yeah,” he said awkwardly, pursing his lips and tilting his head from side to side, considering.

“Do you want me to wake her up?”

“No, no-I actually came for you. I wanted to, uh, talk to you for a minute before Talon and Ernest get back from Mirage today.” Rowan shifted uncomfortably, then tilted his head toward the hallway. I nodded firmly, my chest tightening with anxiety as followed him down the hallway and through the darkened house.

Gretchen was in the kitchen, surrounded by the smell of breakfast sausage and coffee as she chopped potatoes. She looked up from the butcher block, her eyes creasing as her mouth stretched into a beaming smile. “Good morning!” she exclaimed, setting the knife down and turning to pull two mugs out of a cabinet.

She filled both of them with coffee and added a liberal amount of fresh cream, which made my stomach tighten with anticipation. We had been eating nothing but dried food and grains for weeks, and no one aboard Damian’s cruiser could cook worth a damn. Yesterday, we’d been too busy to eat a

proper meal, so I was hoping whatever plan Rowan had for me could wait until after

breakfast.

Thankfully, Rowan settled himself on a stool next to the kitchen island, and I followed suit, sipping my coffee and watching as Gretchen began to pour pancake batter into a large cast iron skillet slicked with bacon grease.

“You’re just as handsome and patient as I imagined you, Troy dear,” Gretchen said sweetly as she flipped the pancakes. “It certainly takes a specific type of man to peak Maeve’s interests,”

“Handle her, you mean,” Rowan said over the rim of his coffee mug, smirking at Gretchen as she cast him a dirty look. She was a friendly older woman who exuded what I could only describe as “grandma energy,” and she looked the part as well, dressed in an apron decorated with embroidered tea pots and apples. She clicked her tongue at Rowan, pointing her finger accusingly.

“You’d best watch your tongue, young man. You and Maeve should’ve been twins, I always say. So alike. It’s no wonder your mates are such quiet, humble people. Is Hanna coming up to the house today? I want to send her home with some blueberry jam my granddaughter made this fall.”

“I can swing by her place later, if not,” Rowan said, watching as Gretchen grabbed two plates from the dishrack. “Could we get breakfast to go? Would that be too much trouble?”

“Not at all, darling.” Gretchen rummaged around in the cabinets for two plastic containers as we continued to drink our coffee. I felt a little shy to the point of being uncomfortable. This was Rowan’s domain. Maeve’s childhood home. I was, to be blunt, an unwanted guest. Surely, Gretchen knew about the situation, having worked so closely with the family over the years. Maeve called her Grannie, in fact.

Rowan got up with the plastic containers in his hands, thanking Gretchen as she filled two thermoses with coffee, which she handed to me to carry.

“You’d better be planning on wearing your helmet, Rowan. You know how your mother feels about those deathtraps,”

“I know, I know,” Rowan said over his shoulder. “Thanks for breakfast, Gretchen!”

“Helmets?” I asked as we reached the stairwell that led down to the garage. I had slept there the night we arrived in Winter Forest, but it had been very dark. I could only make out the immediate area around me, which was a tool bench and a few bikes.

“Snowmobiles,” Rowan said simply, shrugging as I followed him down the stairs. “Ever been on one?”

“I’m from the Isles,”

“Then imagine a jetski, but for snow. It’s very similar.” He flipped on a light switch as we reached the bottom of the stairs, and the garage erupted into light. I took a moment to be shocked, then composed myself and swallowed the many, many questions swirling through my mind.

The garage was as large, if not larger, than the house itself. Four snowmobiles sat near the garage door, primed and ready for use. An assortment of other outdoor equipment leaned against the walls, bikes and several sets of skis and snowboards. A large pickup truck sat idle in the far corner of the garage next to what looked like a tractor, both covered in tarps. I hadn’t been around cars in my life, but I could tell the truck was old... Vintage, some might say. Rowan caught me looking at it and gave me a crooked smile. “It’s Dad’s. He’s been working on it for years.”

“Where did he find it? I’ve never seen a vehicle that old before.” I ran my tongue along the inside of my lower lip, wondering if Rowan would protest if I poked around the garage for a moment.

“I don’t know. It just showed up one day. He had to have it towed up here from the port, and it’s been sitting in the garage for fifteen years or so now. Mom says it takes up too much space.”

“I mean,” I said, unable to hide my shock, “I don’t think that matters that much. This place is huge.”

Rowan set the food containers on one of the snowmobiles and started to grab gear off the shelves on the far wall, pulling down an assortment of gloves and padded jackets. I walked around, glancing at the tool bench before letting my

gaze wander further into the recesses of the garage, which was double the length of the house, built like a basement beneath the backyard.

There was a set of rooms in the back, a bathroom and what looked like a small office or storage room. I could see an icon bouncing around on what looked like a screen and couldn't hold back my questions any longer.

"Is that a computer?" I asked, turning to face Rowan.

He set down the helmet he was holding and inhaled deeply, his cheeks turning a little red.

"Yeah, it is."

"How? I've never seen one-"

"I-I built it." I could hear the apprehension in his voice, and I quickly realized why his cheeks had colored. He was embarrassed.

"Are you serious? I've only ever read about them. I didn't think any

were left outside of... of the dashboards on boats and planes." The war had destroyed most of the technology to use them, so there was no reason for anyone to have one.

He stared blankly at me for a moment, his shoulders losing some of their tension as he picked up on my excitement. "I'm building more radio towers. I needed a way to test the frequency needed to connect the packs of Valoria and keep track of the data. It doesn't do much besides that but... I'm proud of it."

"You should be," I said earnestly, wanting nothing more than for him to show me exactly what he could do with it.

Rowan smiled broadly, blushing a little more as he balanced the helmet on his hip. "Maybe when we get back I can show you, if Dad

-" he paused, pursing his lips and shaking his head. "I'm not supposed to like you, you know."

"Yeah, I get it." I couldn't help but laugh. Rowan motioned me over to him and we spent the next fifteen minutes suiting up to take the snowmobiles out. It was arduous work, and I was sweating by the time we had packed the food

and coffee into two backpacks and backed the snowmobiles out into the driveway.

“I don’t think I need to tell you how to ride one of these!” Rowan shouted through his helmet.

“I’ll figure it out!” I replied, not sure if he could hear me. “You’re not planning on leading me away from the village and stranding me somewhere, are you?”

That he had heard, and he threw his head back, laughing. “You’re not who I was expecting you to be, Troy. I think that would be a waste. Plus, Dad would kill me if anything happened to that snowmobile.”

The mountains were blanketed in snow so fine it didn’t make a sound as we parked the snowmobiles and stepped off of them. I looked out over the village, which seemed to be miles below us, the lights of the cabins just visible in the deep purple morning sky.

The stars shining above us were like something I had never seen before, so close I felt like I could touch them. A green band of light danced over the mountains on the other side of the inlet, like a ribbon, casting a strange glow over the far mountains.

“I see why we couldn’t have just shifted,” I said as I set my helmet down on the snowmobile and lifted the thermos of coffee to my lips.

“Well, you can. But nothing is worse than getting snowballs stuck between the pads of your paws.”

“Ah, yeah. I can imagine.”

Rowan handed me one of the food containers and we sat on our snowmobiles to eat in relative quiet, watching the aurora continue its spirited dance.

“I’m not going to apologize for punching you,” Rowan said after a few minutes of silence.

“I wasn’t expecting an apology,” I replied, closing up the empty container and putting it in my backpack. He did the same, but kept his eyes on me.

“What was your reasoning for everything that happened in Mirage? What exactly did you gain from pretending to be Aaron of Red Lakes?”

I had seen this conversation coming. I'd had it already with Ethan, although he hadn't asked me a single question the entire time. I had rattled off everything in quick succession, and he had simply walked away when I was done. Rowan was interrogating me. He brought me up here to do it in private. .

“Damian offered us money to break Romero out of the castle. I thought that was it. I didn't realize there was something else going on until it was too late.”

“And that something had to do with Maeve?”

I nodded, leaning forward and resting my elbows on my knees. “Damian knew my parents. Or, at least, he said he did. Romero was my grandfather, but I never knew him before I saw him in the tower for the first time. It was... not what I was expecting.”

“You didn't know your parents?”

I looked over at him, shaking my head. “Not my mom. I have no memories of her. I assume she's dead.”

Rowan looked away. “Maddalyn, right? Ernest brought back your sketchbook from Mirage... We saw the portrait. I didn't know who it was, but my parents were sure—”

“Yeah. I didn't even know her name until recently.”

That caught him off guard. He looked at me, his expression twisted in confusion.

“What do you mean you didn't know her name?”

I inhaled, shaking my head, and then told him about my childhood. I watched his face go through several transformations as I told him what I thought was information his family would need to paint

me in a clear picture. How I had been a thief, a pirate... an orphan.

“Are you here to kill my Dad?” he asked once I had finished speaking. His words were said so casually for how much weight they bore. I looked up at him, steeling my expression. “Is that why you stayed with Maeve—”

“No,” I said firmly, looking him squarely in the eyes. “She’s my mate, Rowan. I knew it the second I saw her. We met before | knew she was... the princess. I should’ve left Valoria that very second, but I couldn’t give her up-”

“I understand,” he said quickly, interrupting me. “I couldn’t do that either. Hanna, my mate. You haven’t met her yet, but... you will. Today, probably. There’s going to be a family meeting after Dad talks to you about...” he trailed off, looking out over the inlet and then back to me again. “You do know that you’re the Alpha of Poldesse, right?”

I let out my breath in a long whoosh, the warm air turning to mist. “If I have to be,” I said honestly, giving him a wry smile.

He arched his brow, then laughed, shaking his head. “I knew we had a few things in common.”

“You don’t want to take your Dad’s title someday?”

He shrugged, taking a sip of coffee. “Someone’s gotta do it.”

“Is that why you were embarrassed about the computer? Because you’re-”

“Going to be the Alpha of all Alpha’s one day?” he said, adding a dramatic flair to the words that made me smile. He exhaled, looking up at the fading stars.

“I wanted to go to college in Mirage and study engineering. Literally any kind of engineering, I didn’t care. It goes against the type of man my dad needs me to be, you know. Someone fierce. Someone who can command not just a pack but EVERY pack. I’m not the type of person. I just want to make things. I want to know how things work, how they used to work.”

The sun was just starting to peak over the mountains, casting the pink glow over the inlet that Maeve had told me so much about. We watched a plane circle the inlet twice, then land gracefully on the water. “That’ll be Talon and Ernest. We should go,” he said, clearing his throat.

“You shouldn’t have to choose between the two. If anything, the pack lands could use your skills.”

“I don’t know if my dad sees it that way.” Rowan slung his backpack over his shoulder and put his helmet on, and I realized I might have struck a chord with him.

Maybe I had been lucky to have not known my parents or my lineage. I grew up making my own decisions, deciding my own

fate.

“What’s going to happen now? Damian is dead, you know. And Tasia,”

Rowan gave me a weary look before he closed the visor on his

helmet.

“I don’t know. But I do know Dad is going to send you back to the Isles. I just don’t know if he’ll allow Maeve to go with you.”

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 304

Chapter 84: Fathers and Sons

Troy

Ernest threw his arms around me, embracing me in a rib cracking hug. I had been, of course, speechless when I saw Gemma on the night of our arrival in Winter Forest and at the news that they had not only both survived, but had a child in our absence. Seeing Ernest in the flesh was even better than the news, however. And I found myself rattling off about our adventure before remembering we had an audience.

Talon, Ernest’s father, and Ethan’s prior Beta, was watching Ernest and me closely.

Ethan was pacing back and forth in front of the ceiling-height windows in the library in the White Queen’s Castle, a space the family rarely used. Part of the castle was a school now, and another section had been converted into apartments for the single warriors of the pack.

Ethan’s office was too small to house all of us men, and there was absolutely no privacy in the house with the amount of family roaming about.

So, we closed ourselves into the library, the door locking in place, holding me captive.

“And Maeve, she’s due soon, then?” Ernest asked with nothing but pure joy in his eyes.

“A few weeks left to go, but the midwife that came with us to the south, Cleo, said she was likely to go early. Any day now, it seems.

Maeve is miserable!” | replied, unable to stop myself from smiling.

“Why? Is everything alright?” Ernest looked concerned, but I waved my hand in dismissal.

“Twins,”

“TWINS?” Rowan roared from the opposite end of the room, closing the book he’d been skimming through while we were waiting for Ethan to finish whatever he was doing.

Ernest looked shocked, but then laughed, clapping me on the shoulder. “No one can say you weren’t a successful breeder-” Ernest’s voice was, unfortunately, not a whisper.

Talon loudly cleared his throat, and the three of us younger men quieted immediately as we caught Ethan’s stone-cold gaze.

“Too soon?” Rowan murmured, which made Ernest flush a vivid pink.

“Are you serious about this, Ernest?” Ethan said, ignoring our remarks. He slammed his open hand on the long table we’d gathered around, his hand pressing a piece of paper against the waxed surface.

“L... I am,” Ernest said, swallowing hard and squaring his shoulders. “I am sure.”

“And you, Talon? This is not what I expected from either of you!”

I took a step away from Ernest, sensing the anger beginning to radiate off of Ethan. Rowan and I were now shoulder to shoulder, watching with interest as Talon nodded his head.

“I agree with Ernest’s decision. I think he’s making the right choice.”

“Giving up his title?” Ethan bit out.

Rowan went totally rigid, his breath catching in his throat. I fought the urge to nudge him to encourage him to start breathing again, but that was hit with the same realization he had come to.

If Ernest was giving up his title of Alpha of Drogomor...

“Wait just a minute-” Rowan said as he stepped forward.

Ethan raised his hand, silencing Rowan, and turned his gaze back to Ernest.

“Why? You realize this will leave you without a title, a title your son would inherit?”

“That’s not important to me. I’ve discussed it in length with Gemma. We... Uncle Ethan, we don’t want to leave. We both felt it the second we finally made it here, that we were home. Gemma died in Mirage. She doesn’t want to go back. I don’t want her to go back.”

“She would be Luna-” Ethan said, cutting Ernest off.

“She doesn’t want that, Uncle Ethan. I don’t want that for her. We want George to... to grow up with parents who have time for him. We want him to have friends, and a community where he’s not ostracized for being a royal. We want what you built here with Rosalie. A home, not a castle.”

Ernest was gripping the back of one of the chairs that lined the table, his eyes focused intently on Ethan. “I became Alpha because that was the only life I knew. I never thought I’d find my mate or have children. Gemma changed that for me. Everything is different now. Besides, it was always meant to be temporary, remember?”

Ethan flexed his jaw, considering Ernest’s words but he did not respond. He glanced over at Rowan, who was standing like a statue next to me, his eyes focused on the windows and the snow falling outside.

“The title is Rowan’s birthright.” Talon pulled one of the chairs from the table and sat down, calm and collected. Ernest nodded, glancing at Rowan, who was still looking out the window.

“You have to let me go, Dad,” Rowan whispered.

I doubted anyone but me heard it.

Ethan flexed his hands, then picked up the piece of paper, folding it and tucking it into the pocket of his jacket. "We'll talk about this another time."

Rowan moved his gaze from the window to Ethan, and I saw a flash of disappointment behind his eyes.

I knew nothing about fathers and sons, but I knew there was an unspoken conflict between Ethan and Rowan, something that had been brewing for a long time. Ethan was, for whatever reason, holding Rowan back.

Ernest shifted uncomfortably before taking a seat next to Talon, while Rowan and I remained standing.

I felt Ethan's eyes on me, and slowly returned his gaze.

"I'm not who you were expecting, right?" I said, unable to stop the words from falling from my lips. Talon blinked up at me, and Ernest bit the inside of his lip to stop himself from smiling. "You were expecting someone like Romero, I'm guessing. Not me."

Ethan was motionless, expressionless. This was the big meeting, I thought. This is when he was going to sit me down and rip me to shreds.

"Who raised you?" Ethan's tone was cold, meaning to cut me.

"No one," I said honestly, leaning forward as I placed my hands on the top of one of the chairs. I was sore from riding the snowmobile up and down the mountain, sore in places where I didn't know it was possible. I worried if I sat down, I wouldn't be able to get up again. "Behar was my father's name-

"We know that." Ethan crossed his arms over his chest, leaning back in his chair. "Was he the one who raised you, Troy? Is he still alive? The last we heard, he had died before you were born."

"I wouldn't know-"

"What do you mean you wouldn't know?" Ethan looked me up and down, his eyes slicing me open.

"I haven't seen him since I was four years old."

I caught Talon in my peripheral vision, shifting in his seat as he looked over at Ethan with a furrowed brow.

“I didn’t know either of my parents. I have no memories of my mother. And my father, or the man I thought was my father anyway, well, he straight up left me in Avondale and didn’t come back. I grew up with a group of orphans. You’ve likely heard of Keaton, the captain of the Persephone? He was one of them.”

Everyone was staring at me. Ernest and Rowan exchanged glances, then Ernest gave me a nod of encouragement.

“I didn’t know Romero even existed let alone was my relative until last winter, when Damian told me he needed me to go to Valoria.

He said Romero was my grandfather, and I... I wanted to know him. I wanted to at least look at him. I didn’t know what I was walking into. Damian must have known about your plans for Maeve. I was in Valoria for several weeks before I was ever introduced to her.

And—”

I straightened up to my full height, clenching my hands into fists behind my back, “the moment I saw her, I knew she was my mate. I just knew. I wasn’t able to carry out my mission from that moment forward.”

“Yet you bedded her and got her pregnant?” Ethan said bluntly, folding his hands on the table. “You fulfilled the duties of breeder

“I loved her. I did everything I could to protect her from Damian, and Horace, and Romero. I had to keep her in the dark until the last possible moment. Maeve is... incapable of being secretive. She can’t lie without it showing on her face. You know this.”

I spoke firmly, fixing my gaze on Ethan’s eyes despite the nagging fear ripping through my body. It was some way to get to know my future wife’s dad, with an audience, no less.

Rowan snorted with laughter, then quickly quieted.

“I couldn’t let them have her, Alpha. I did what I could.”

Ethan exhaled, looking over at Talon briefly, before asking me, “What do you want, exactly?”

“What do I want?” I repeated, unsure what kind of answer he was expecting. “Uh, your daughter, of course?”

“Because of her powers, in her blood-”

| “No-” I gave Ethan a stern look, watching him closely.

I wondered if Maeve had told her parents about the fact that her blood was incapable of healing my wounds.

“Is this some vendetta against us for what happened to your mother?” Ethan said with conviction, his voice an octave lower than it had been previously.

I went still, shaking my head in confusion. “I don’t know what happened to her.”

The room was silent, the only sound was the ticking of a clock on the far side wall. Ethan’s face went through a transformation, his expression darkening as he considered my words. Then, he looked oddly... sad. Guilty.

“Sit down, Troy.”

“I don’t need to-”

“Sit.”

My body disobeyed my mind, and I found myself seated in front of Ethan.

The Alpha motioned, and Talon left with Rowan and Ernest, leaving me alone with Maeve’s father. He stared at me, taking me in.

But his eyes weren’t cold any longer. His gaze was soft and full of pity.

“I don’t need to know what happened to her,” I said quickly, before I changed my mind.

“It’s important you know about her, Troy. Her heritage makes you who you are... which is an Alpha. It’s something we need to

discuss.”

I wondered how long this was going to take. I'd left the house before Maeve had woken up, and now it was midday. I was sure she'd know that I was with her dad, but still. I didn't like being this far away from her with the state she was currently in.

"I can tell you why you didn't know your mother, Troy. I was under the impression you had been adopted out to a family we had chosen in Finaldi, away from the Isles. I had wiped my hands clean of the situation by the time you were born. Your mother... Maddalyn, she was executed shortly after your birth."

"That's what I had always been told, but I didn't know for sure."

Ethan cleared his throat, tapping one of his fingers on the table. "We had a treaty with Damian back then. The Isles, like the east, were in shambles. I gave Damian the money he needed to reconstruct Avondale, in exchange for Poldesse dissolving. I didn't know Poldesse was operating in secret, and that Damian was working with Romero while Romero was serving his sentence."

He continued. "Before Rosalie and I returned to Winter Forest, we arranged for a family known by Vicky, Talon's sister, to take you. Vicky and her mate, Paul, moved to Breles, though, so we never got confirmation you had actually been given over to the couple. We sent you with some of Damian's people, so we trusted since we'd heard nothing, that the couple had raised you."

I didn't dare breathe. I didn't know if I wanted him to continue.

"You said you knew your father?"

"Yes, I think so, but I... I was very young. My memories are fuzzy. I remember him always being ill. We lived in seclusion, I remember that much."

"And you're sure his name was Behar?"

"I... I called him Dad," I said painfully, looking down at the table. "Damian told me his name."

"I don't know if that was actually Behar, Troy. We were under the impression that Behar was dead; Maddalyn told us as much."

I looked up, shrugging. I'd already heard that. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, Alpha. I don't have the information you're looking for. I'm not here to avenge my parents."

"Just call me Ethan," he breathed, reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose as though he had a headache. "I can't apologize for what happened with your mother, but I am sorry you weren't better taken care of."

"Why would you have anything to be sorry for,"

"I should've done a better job of making sure you were safe, even though your mother's crimes were the true reason for all of this. None of us could've anticipated how this would've affected you."

I shook my head. "What's done is done now."

He continued with his version of the story. "Before your mother became a rogue, I said I was going to marry her. Then I got her to the altar and had her banished instead for her treatment of Rosalie, for plotting to kill her, and for her aiding in her father's schemes to take over Valoria with our union. She waged war on us for years."

"What was she like?" I asked abruptly, trying to hide the longing in my voice.

He caught it nonetheless. "She was mean," he said with a matter

of-fact tone. "So, so mean. I can't really explain it. We were never allies. I could never trust her. But she was beautiful. You look like her. Had I seen you before any of this," he waved his hand, alluding to the current situation, "I would have known you were her son. I am sorry, Troy, for failing you. You should have been raised by a family, not left to fend for yourself."

"Does this mean I have your blessing to marry your daughter?" I asked, and the question caught him off guard.

He arched his brow, giving me a quizzical glance. "Did you hear anything I just said?"

"Uh, yeah. And that's all fine. I only care about Maeve."

"Enough to be the Alpha of Poldesse?"

I pursed my lips. I knew this was coming. I took a deep breath, crossing my arms over my chest as I looked at him, shaking my head. "I'm not who you want there. I might be an ally, but I'm not a royal. Maybe by blood, okay? But I grew up parentless. I lack a formal education. I was a thief, a pirate. And Maeve would have to come with me, unless you're planning on separating us."

"I'm not."

"Then how is she supposed to be the White Queen? We'd be separated nonetheless."

"Rosalie and I make it work,"

"You're on the same continent. Mirage is only a few hours away by plane. Plus, you have a son and a nephew to rule while you stay here with your mate." I leaned over the table, knowing what I said next was a risk. "Queen Rosalie is sick, Ethan. Maeve needs to prepare to become the White Queen, now. Not later. We don't have

that luxury."

Ethan was expressionless. He just stared at me, his eyes on mine, but he was looking right through me.

"Why do you want me to take over Poldesse? Why not just let it dissolve? It was a small pack to begin with. Most people didn't follow Damian."

"Because someone else will take over if you don't."

"So? Who has a vendetta against you right now? Tasia just wants to kill us all and get the moonstone. That's a totally different situation."

Ethan blinked, startled by my words. "You really just say whatever comes to your mind, don't you?"

"It's how I won over your daughter," I smirked, leaning back in my chair.

Ethan wasn't so bad. He just looked like a big, tough guy. I had been around those all my life. But Ethan was sharp as a tack as well, and I already knew why he wanted me to take over Poldesse. I didn't need an explanation. He

wanted someone he could trust there, someone like his daughter's husband. He also wanted Maeve to marry someone of a high rank.

What's higher than an Alpha?

"Was that before or after you kidnapped her?" Ethan retorted, and to my surprise, he gave me a fleeting smile.

My response was cut short by the door to the library swinging open and a breathless Rowan stepping inside.

"Dad, you've gotta come outside, now. There are people from Lycenna in the village seeking refuge. Alpha Julien is dead."

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 305

Chapter 85: She Can See the Future

Maeve

The village was buzzing with activity as I followed Mom into the center of the rows of cottages and buildings housing the shops and market. Gretchen had bundled her up in a thick, heavy red wool coat and a matching hat, the color a stark

contrast to the snow and white-washed buildings. Mom was barking orders to the warriors who had surrounded a group of a dozen or so weary-looking people, strangers.

"Who are they? How did they get here?" I turned to Gemma, who shrugged, her face lined with suspicion.

She had heard the commotion from her house and came to fetch us, but the warriors had beaten her there, and we were already in the driveway when Gemma arrived. She had given George to Gretchen and then followed us down to the village, where the warrior had gathered the unfamiliar group into the snow-covered market square.

"They shouldn't be out here; it's freezing. Take them up to the castle. Offer food and water. Now!" Mom's voice rang out through the square.

She sounded every ounce the queen, and I couldn't help but smile to myself as I watched her commanding the warriors. The group began to move, the warriors herding them away. But an elderly woman had stopped walking, separating from the group.

She was looking past me, her eyes fixated on something behind me. I turned to look over my shoulder in the direction of her gaze and saw a young woman standing at the edge of the market square, her black hair dappled with snowflakes.

"Who is that?" I asked Gemma, who turned to look.

"Oh, that's Hanna."

"Hanna of Red Lakes?"

Hanna's gaze shifted from the elderly woman to me, and I quickly turned back around, a blush rising to my cheeks. I vaguely remember Hanna from when her family visited. She was a year older than me, but aside from a formal introduction when their family arrived, I didn't think I'd seen her for the rest of their short-lived trip. She had been nowhere to be seen when Aaron fell from the tree.

"Yeah, she's Rowan's mate. I'm sure someone told you," Gemma said.

"I feel like I've only been told snippets of what's been happening here, Gem. Who are these people? They didn't come by boat. That means they would've had to come through-through the forest? How is that possible?" The old roads were so overgrown now; it would take so long for anyone to get through that way.

Gemma glanced at me, somewhat shocked. "Did your dad not tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"Maeve? Is that really *you*?" A familiar male voice cut through

the air, and I found myself paralyzed by surprise. It couldn't

1. be.

"O-Otto?" I said, my voice wavering as a man walked toward me dressed in warrior garb. He stopped walking a few feet from where Gemma and I were

standing, looking me up and down. I wasn't sure I recognized him at first, but then his mouth twitched into a wide smile. "Oh, my Goddess. How?"

"Oh, Maeve. It's so good to see you!" He closed the distance between us, taking my hand in his and squeezing it. "I heard you were home. I've been busy, I should have come up to the house right away but it was my son's birthday,"

"Son?" I was stunned.

Thadn't seen Otto in fifteen years, not since he went with the expedition party to explore the Eastern Mountains that separated Mirage and Winter Forest. We all thought he was dead, along with Gemma's mother, Seraphine.

"I have five children. My wife, Shelly, she," he paused, looking between Gemma and me to where Hanna had been standing.

I turned to look at her again, an unusual feeling creeping over me. Her gaze was still locked on the elderly woman, who was being rounded up with the rest of the group.

"Anyway, I'll find you soon, okay? I'm happy you're home." Otto patted my shoulder, then jogged back to the other warriors, stopping to speak to Mom.

"Hanna?" Gemma asked as she turned, tucking her gloved hands into the pockets of her jacket. "Do you know that woman?"

"I feel like I do. Does that sound crazy?" Hanna replied, walking toward us as if Gemma's words had been an invitation.

I went still at her words, her voice sounding so familiar.

"Where is she from?" Gemma asked.

Hanna blinked, then looked around. "Where's Rowan?" she asked, looking toward Mom.

"Uh, I think he went to the castle with Alpha Ethan this morning-"

"We should go to them. Come on Hanna took us by the hands, the feeling of her skin against mine sending a ripple of familiar energy through my body. I almost let go but felt an odd connection to her.

Like we had met before, and not when we were children.

The castle was bustling with life as I stepped inside behind Hanna and Gemma, shielding my eyes from the heavy snow falling from the deep gray sky. It was late afternoon, and the sun had already set behind the clouds. The castle grounds were washed in yellow light from the lanterns dotted around the façade of the castle, and light spilled from the windows onto the glistening snow.

“Maeve!” Troy came to me the second I stepped into the grand foyer, taking my hand and leading me away from Hanna and Gemma. “I’m sorry I left without a word this morning. Rowan and I-”

“It’s okay; I slept in for a while. And then... do you know who these people are? Has anyone said?”

“Your dad is talking to their leader right now in the library. I think we should go see them.”

“Why?”

He paused, his thumb tracing a circle in the palm of my hand.

“They’re like the people of Dianny. I think... I think these are the people Una talked about, the ones Lycaon left behind when he was fleeing from Morrighan.”

“Oh, great...” I huffed as he guided me toward the library. I wondered cynically if we were ever going to have an ounce of normalcy in our lives ever again.

Dad was situated at the end of the long library table, his hands folded neatly on the surface and his body leaning forward as he conversed with the same elderly woman I had seen in the market square.

She was filthy, dressed in worn rags. Someone had covered her with a thick blanket and given her a steaming cup of what smelled like chicken soup, which immediately made me hungry.

Dad looked up as we came into the room, nodding tightly as Troy stationed us against the wall near the door. Mom was seated next to Dad, still in her red coat, but she was pale, her face flushed with fatigue.

The woman turned to me, looking me up and down with interest before turning back to Dad, settling herself back in

her seat as she closed her hands around the mug of soup.

“So you can guarantee our refuge?” Her voice contradicted her appearance. She was small, old, and frail, but her voice was youthful and steady.

Dad tapped his fingers on the table, looking at Mom, who was still.

“That depends on whether you will tell us who you are and why you’re here,” Mom said stoically and unblinking, tilting her head toward Dad. “We won’t risk the peace of our pack for unknown enemies.”

“He knows who we are,” the woman said, pointing a shaky finger at Dad. “Lycenna.”

“What happened to your Alpha? Dad said sternly.

The woman waved her hand in dismissal. “Dead. Took him long enough, the old bastard. He outlived his sons and grandsons. His great-grandsons were fighting over his title.”

“Who prevailed?” Dad asked.

“Most of them killed each other

“How many people are fighting over the title, exactly?” Mom’s voice had a tinge of unease to it as she spoke.

The woman gave her a sidelong glance before bringing her soup to her lips. “Well, everyone was related to Julien in some way. So anyone could be the Alpha, any man that is. Carl is the clear choice because he has powers, although they aren’t strong. But he’s an evil man... barely twenty-six and has five wives after he claimed his dead brother’s women.”

Mom was stunned into silence. I felt nervous sweat forming along my brow as the room seemed to tighten all around me. Had the woman really said what I thought she said?

“Where is the dark-haired girl from the market? I need to speak with her,” said the woman abruptly.

Mom shook her head, not understanding.

“Hanna?” I said, not meaning to speak allowed.

The woman turned her head to look at me, her eyes narrowing on mine. “I’ll tell you everything you need to know if I can speak with the girl. She needs to hear it.”

“Why?” Mom asked defensively.

“Because she’s one of us. She is the true leader of Lycenna, as her mother should have been. And her grandmother before her, my sister. The ones with the powers.”

“Your sister?” Mom’s voice wavered, and Dad stood, motioning to Troy to get Hanna from the foyer.

“Hanna, the girl of which you speak, is Leera’s daughter, is she not? Leera was my niece. My sister left the pack when Leera was just an infant, hiding away somewhere in the West. If that dark-haired child possesses even a fraction of the powers Leera possessed at birth-”

Mom stood, her chair falling against the floor behind her. I couldn’t help but flinch, my stomach tightening into a contraction as I watched Mom lean forward, her hands flat against the table.

“What is it to you? Why are you here?”

“A war is coming, White Queen. I got my people out before the Dream Dancer could ravage what was left of our pack, those true followers of Lycaon. The rest-Carl and his people well, they will bend to the Dream Dancer from the south.”

The woman turned her gaze to me, her eyes darkening. “Even your child possesses the powers of Lycaon. Have you not noticed? She even has a familiar. I can feel it. The dog I saw in the village, is it? She can speak to it, can’t she? Every second we are drawing closer to the conclusion-”

Hanna burst through the doors of the library, stepping forward into the light of the massive chandelier. She stopped short of the table, staring the old woman down with a glare so intense I felt a fight or flight response of my own. I

decided at that moment that I needed to leave. But Troy was back at my side, his hand tightening around my forearm, holding me in place.

“Leera’s child-” The old woman grinned. “I knew it. You look like us, you know. You look like your grandmother, Esmerelda.”

“There are three of us,” Hanna said coolly, looking the woman down. “But I am here. Explain yourself. Why did you lead your people to Winter Forest?”

“Three? Do you all have the power of Lycaon?”

Hanna shook her head from side to side, her hair rippling in the soft amber light of the chandelier as she approached the table. “What do you want?”

“Refuge,” the old woman sighed, knitting her hands together. “And to tell you what’s coming.”

“Then tell us,” Hanna sneered.

I watched her, feeling overwhelmed by her prowess. Surely, this wasn’t Rowan’s mate? I’d always pictured him with someone shy and quiet, not a commanding sorceress.

But I caught the look of shock on Mom’s face as she looked at Hanna. She had obviously never seen or heard Hanna command herself in such a way.

Dad came to Hanna’s side and put his hand on her shoulder. She straightened her back, her lower lip trembling slightly as she tried to maintain her composure.

“Lycenna has been operating under a cloak of secrecy since the first White Queen. *We* watched your war, Alpha King, that ravaged our forests. *We* know you used the Moonlight Lily, White Queen. That act, that use of ancient, sacred magic... it opened the door for us to come out of hiding. The door between our world and the world of the contemporary wolf had opened.

“You still teach your young the stories, don’t you? But you leave out the names of Leto and her children. They are myths, to you. To us, it is our life. Our culture. But we have more in common than you think. Your daughter, with the red hair. She will be a White Queen. She will have powers that will be far beyond the scope of your own- she pointed to Mom, who bristled.

“But the child of my great-niece, well... her child will be the

first to combine the blood of the two lines. That child will be the next coming of the Moon Goddess herself. Alpha Julien knew the time was nearing. He sensed the fated mate bond between the two lines in your son. We knew there could only

be two options. Leera’s child, or the Dream Dancer from the south.” The old woman paused to sip her soup, sighing deeply as the warm liquid touched her lips.

“How do you know all of this?” Dad asked in a sharp tone.

Troy’s hand ran down the length of my forearm, his fingers intertwining with mine.

“Dream Dancers are the sacred ones to us. Those that can manipulate the world and move within the spirit realm. It’s rare, despite the efforts of Lycenna to strengthen it by breeding. But, some of us, especially the women, possess the power of sight. I could tell you your future right now, if you wished to know. I could tell you how you will die, and when. I can tell your daughter about the future of her unborn sons, and which will inherit the dynasty their grandfather is crafting.”

Troy tightened his grip on my hand, his body leaning toward the door as though it was willing him to leave, to take me with him.

“But you knew someone like that already, didn’t you?” The old woman looked from Dad to Mom, waiting for a response. Mom looked down at the table, her eyes glistening with tears. “Gayla was my oldest sister; she left with Esmerelda, helped her hide Leera from Julien... Leera showed powers from birth. She would’ve been passed around for breeding the second she-”

“Stop!” Mom raised her hands, shaking her head.

“What do you want from me?” Hanna said softly. Her voice was full of hurt and uncertainty, and again I felt a sense of

familiarity when she spoke.

“Tasia of Dianny was the Dream Dancer Alpha Julien had been waiting for. She wants the stones, and she will do anything to retrieve them, including

massacring her own pack. Julien thought Tasia would be the prince's mate. It was prophesied upon his birth. But Julien was wrong. He didn't know about you, Hanna. All of you can thank Gayla for that."

Mom let out a choked sob. I stepped forward to go to her, but Troy stopped me, slowly shaking his head from side to side. Mom and Dad had both loved Gayla. I had considered Gayla a grandmother. Her passing had been exceedingly painful for all of us. She died when I was ten, but the pain still felt fresh.

The old woman turned in her chair, looking straight at me, her eyes boring into mine.

"You're not cursed, child. Gayla couldn't see past your tenth birthday because that was the year your brother met Hanna, his mate. The introduction of your families signified the dawn of the prophecy to unite the stones, to bring forth the Goddess.

"But Leera couldn't see the woman you'd become. She didn't know your strength or your unyielding loyalty to those you love. She was blinded by love for her son. You will come into your powers, child. As long as the stones are in your possession."

The old woman turned to Dad then, her gaze focused on his eyes. "If Tasia gets the stones... it'll all be over. No one will survive the war. And there will be war. It's already begun."

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 306

Chapter 86: I Can't Have His Child

Hanna

I didn't bother to hang my coat up on the hook as I staggered through the door to the small cabin I shared with Kacidra. I tossed the coat to the floor, the thick fabric falling on the wide-plank floorboards in a wet snowy heap.

Kacidra wasn't home. She had spent the last two nights with Pete, who was living in one of the cabins in the village. They were mates, and the connection had been intense, passionate. I saw the pattern, of course. Troy and Maeve. Ernest and Gemma. Even Keaton, the man who was the captain of the boat

that both kidnapped and saw Maeve to safety, had found his mate in Maeve's friend Myla.

Everyone on this prophesied path was finding their mates, including me. This was the definition of fate.

Apparently, Rowan and Maeve were at the center of it all. And then, there was my role.

I sunk to the floor in front of the couch, my head in my hands, and let myself cry.

I felt nothing but deep, painful guilt after listening to the unnamed old woman's words. She was my great-aunt, my tie to Gayla, the Seer... Gayla, who must have known what my mother would become and the powers she held, the powers

she would give to one of her children.

I thought of the white roses on the temple grounds, how their

petals had littered the stone pavers after Tasia had destroyed the sanctuary. Tasia, who the people of Lycenna were afraid of but also worshiped. The same way they wanted to worship me.

The people who believed my future child would be the Moon Goddess herself.

But I didn't have my powers any longer. I didn't want them back. And I wouldn't be the Goddess's vessel of rebirth.

I peeked through my fingers, my eyes clouded with tears.

There was only one thing I could do to end the prophecy, to break the chain of events that were plaguing a family I had grown to love.

I needed to reject Rowan.

I sucked in my breath and wiped the tears from my cheeks, nodding at myself as I silently agreed to the inevitable.

But then there was a knock on the front door, and then a cold rush of air.

“Hanna? Goddess, it’s freezing in here,” Rowan crossed the threshold of the front door, shutting it firmly behind him before stalking toward the neglected wood stove.

I watched him in silence as he crouched in front of it, stoking the dying embers with pieces of kindling until a fire erupted from the ashes once again. He meticulously added pieces of split birch to the woodstove, arranging them in such a way that guaranteed a slow, hot burn. I couldn’t help but smile as I watched him, my heart squeezing in my chest.

Rowan, my Rowan.

He turned around, seeing me sitting against the foot of the couch. “What’s wrong? Are you alright? Maeve told me what happened at the castle.” He stepped forward, kneeling down in front of me and taking my chilled fingers in his hands. “You’re cold, Hanna.”

“I have to go home,” I whispered unsure if I meant for him to hear it or if I just needed to say the words aloud.

He looked confused, sitting back so that he faced me with his arms wrapped around his knees, “To Red Lakes?”

I nodded, dreading what I needed to say next.

“Why?”

“I can’t be your mate, Rowan. There’s too much… too much at stake. I can’t continue to put you and your family in danger.”

“What do you think is going to happen?” He was

expressionless, but a sadness lingered behind his eyes, something that told me he had known this conversation was coming.

“Tasia wants me as much as she wants the stones. I need to

1. go. I need to bring the stones with me when I do. You cannot follow.”

“I won’t allow you to do that.” The firmness in his voice sent a chill up my spine. I looked up at him, his face distorted by the strands of hair that were falling over my face.

“We can’t be together. The consequences are too great. If we have a child... that child...”

“You really believe what that senile old woman said? About our child being the second-coming of the Goddess? Come on, Hanna.”

“Why don’t you believe that could be possible after everything that’s already happened? A year ago you were just a shifter,”

“A year ago was a lifetime ago, Hanna. There is no going back now. I won’t let you run. I won’t let you sacrifice yourself for my sake.”

“Your family,”

“My family can fend for themselves. They are more than capable of defeating a single wolf. Lycenna is in shambles from what we understand. They are no longer a pack, or a cult, whatever you want to call it! Mom is seeing to the refugees for now, but they mean to continue north, over the ice-pack. What they think they’ll find there, I don’t know-”

“They’re running, Rowan. Don’t you see why? Tasia isn’t just a single wolf. She was powerful enough to mortally wound your mother. A White Queen. Imagine what she could do with the stones.”

“Maeve is the keeper of the stones, it’s not your responsibility

“You have to let me go!”

He lunged at me, pinning me to the couch. His face was only inches from mine, his blue eyes pleading with my own. No, they seemed to say. No, no, no.

He took my face between his hands and kissed me, softly,

brushing his lips against mine. I fought the urge to cry as he pulled away, not wanting it to end even though I knew it had

1. to.

But he kissed me again, this time harder, the kiss needy and final. I opened my mouth to his, letting him pull me close and wrap me in a desperate embrace.

“I can’t let you go,” he said in a raspy voice, his words tickling the skin on my neck. His mouth moved along my jaw, his fingers tangling in my hair as he gently pulled my head back so I looked up at him, exposed to him. “You’re not going. Not alone.”

Before I knew it, I was in his lap, running my fingertips over his bare chest. My skin was chilled despite the heat of the woodstove, but his hands were warm against my back. He ran his fingers up my spine, sending sparks flying across my skin. My shirt was on the floor, the pale fabric glowing in the light

of the full moon and sending whispers of light through the frosted window next to us.

He rested his hand against my back, forcing me closer, my breasts pressing into his chest as I kissed him deeply. He was gentle with his touches as he explored me, his mouth moving from mine to my neck to my collarbone, lingering there for a moment before he dipped down to take one of my nipples between his teeth.

I let my breath out in a long, pleading moan as the sensation awakened something deep within me. Something I had been holding back for months. Something that could ruin any chances of letting him go.

The moan was the only invitation he needed. He ran his hands

along my thighs, then stood from the couch, holding me against him as he carried me through the living room and into the tight hallway leading to the bedrooms,

He backed into my room, shutting the door with his foot before tossing me on the bed. My heart was pounding against my ribs as he took a step back, looking down at me. Heat flashed behind his eyes as he reached down, his fingers lingering on his belt buckle. I stared at him, taking him in. Trying to memorize every single inch of him.

He was waiting for me, waiting for me to say no, to say yes... to say anything. I swallowed back the mingled fear and despair threatening to take hold of me, and nodded, my mouth parting to whisper an inaudible “please.”

He had his pants off in an instant, standing naked at the foot of the bed. I tried to keep my eyes on his face, afraid to let them wander. This was it for us. I

wanted to remember the way he was looking at me right now more than anything.

He slowly crawled to me, helping me shimmy out of the thick fleece-lined leggings I was wearing and my panties. I was totally bare, completely exposed to him now. I didn't try to hide myself. I closed my eyes as he looked at me, and I was able to feel his gaze move from my eyelids to my navel and the swell of my hips.

I wondered if he had ever done this before. Part of me thought he had, because the way his hands ran down the length of my thigh, his thumb pressing into the flesh behind my knee felt like the work of an experienced man.

But the other part of me thought not, because the way he touched me in all the right places felt as though we had done

this together time and time again, even though it was the first time. I felt electric. His touch sent sparks shooting down my legs and warmth between them, a nagging ache that threatened to take over with each passing second.

His mouth met mine in the softest kiss. I could feel the tears threatening to spill over my lashes as I opened my mouth. He ran his tongue along my lower lip, nibbling it with his teeth as his hands continued to explore.

And then he moved his hand behind my legs, his fingers gliding against the growing wetness. Nothing had ever felt better than his touch against my tender skin.

"Rowan," I breathed, "please..."

Minutes or hours could have gone by; I didn't know for sure. Every second of pain and ecstasy was all part of a drawn-out goodbye. He said my name, the sound of it on his lips sending me over the edge as I gripped his shoulders, pulling him into a tight embrace.

Sometime later I woke to stillness. Outside the frosted window, the full moon still hung high in the cloudless sky. Rowan was sleeping with his arm around me, his fingers limp against my hip bone where I lay turned into his, my face in the crook of his shoulder.

It was cold outside of the snug nest of blankets. I rose and pulled Rowan's shirt over my head, hugging the fabric to my skin. It fit me like a dress, the hem brushing against my bare thighs as I walked through the cabin, turning into the living room with every intention of stoking the fire in the wood stove.

I knelt before it, reaching out to clasp the handle to open it when a sudden warmth wrapped itself around me like a blanket. I blinked and was no longer in the cabin. I was looking out over the water, soft surf brushing against my toes.

I turned to the murmur of voices behind me.

And there I was, standing before the granite temple that used to haunt my dreams. I had thought it signified the Temple of White Queens, and the chaos I had heard in a long-ago dream was a glimpse of the destruction Tasia had caused within its walls.

But I was wrong about something. This temple was intact. It was old, very old, and unfamiliar

A man appeared, his back to me. He was walking to the temple, his head hanging as he sauntered toward the entrance. I felt a wave of familiarity wash over me, the specific locks of his chestnut-colored hair and manner of walking sending chills through my spine.

"Rowan?" I said, but my words were silent, lost in the sound of the waves on the rocky shore.

He turned his head, his sideburns dappled with gray. He looked right at me, through me, as though he had heard me speak but found it shocking.

He swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat as he turned back to the temple, resting his hand on the door frame. A ring made of green stone was on his pinky finger, catching the light as he pushed against the door and stepped into the darkness.

I followed him, my steps quick on the strangely colored flat rocks beneath my feet. But when I reached the temple and stepped inside, I found myself alone.

The altar at the back of the temple was covered in wilted white roses, their petals yellowed and falling to the floor. I looked around, noticing the cobwebs and thick layers of dust on the rows of stone benches, and the cracks in the

stained glass windows that let in pale beams of light, specks of dust floating in their wake.

Again, I heard murmuring, familiar voices chattering in the empty place. I turned back to the altar and the sound ceased. Was that Kacidra I had heard laughing? Gemma's voice lifted

in response?

"But you just got here. You can't leave now!" said a young woman, a teenager, standing at the altar. She had not been there before. Her hair was completely white and pulled back from her face by several intricate braids around her forehead and ears. Her hair flowed all the way down her back, brushing against her hips as she turned to me, a single white rose in her hand.

She was playing with the stem, her finger on the thorn. "Don't leave," she begged, but her voice betrayed her looks. She had the voice of a child, someone much younger than herself, and even her eyes seemed too young for the angled curves of her exquisitely beautiful face.

Her eyes were silver with flakes of blue around the irises, the same blue as Rowan's. The breath caught in my throat as she looked at me, her brow furrowing into a frown.

A man walked through me down the center of the temple. He

was young, his hair a soft copper blond. He bent to whisper to her, and I watched as her face fell, her eyes darkening as she gripped the thorny rose stem in the palm of her hand. The man turned, looking right at me, his eyes two distinctly different colors.

"Wake up, Mama!" the woman cried, tears falling from her white eyelashes. "Please, wake up!"

"Hanna? Hanna wake up-"

I opened my eyes to Rowan looking down at me, his arms wrapped around my naked shoulders. I was still in bed, nestled beneath the quilts with my body against his.

"You were crying in your sleep. Are you okay?"

“I was dreaming,” I said, more to myself than to Rowan.

“Dream Dancing? I thought you lost your powers?”

“No, I... this was a real dream.” Fatigue was pulling me back into sleep.

“We’re going to figure this out, Hanna. I’m not going to lose you,” Rowan said, but I was already miles away, slipping over the edge into a deep, dreamless slumber.

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 307

Chapter 87: Something's Wrong with One of the Babies

Maeve

Three days had passed since the Lycennian refugees came to the village. Mom had been wearing herself thin over their arrival. She had been adamant that I see the village midwife, however. Dad offered to come if he could get away from keeping an eye on the refugees, which surprised me.

Thad barely had a chance to talk to Troy since our arrival in Winter Forest, let alone ask him about the conversations he'd had with Dad, but based on how Troy tended to be on the quiet side and used a filter I didn't know he had whenever he spoke around my family, this made me think that he was walking on eggshells around Dad.

And so I found myself in the small, snow-covered clinic in the center of the village. Troy was pacing back and forth in the snug exam room, tapping his lip with his finger as he stopped to examine the pictures on the walls. He was nervous, especially when the nurse wheeled in an ultrasound machine and plugged it into the wall.

“It's pretty old. Takes a minute to wake up,” the nurse said,

smiling at me.

I was laying on my side on the exam table, having given up on finding a comfortable position. I was feeling swollen and exceedingly grouchy, but I was very much looking forward to what would be my first ultrasound.

Cleo hadn't had access to an ultrasound machine. She had relied on the supplies Una had given to her before we continued our journey through the Southern Pass and her skills as a midwife.

The nurse left the room again, and Dad caught the door before it closed, walking into the room and closing the door behind him. "Your mom wanted me to come so I could tell her about it when I got home," he said, a little breathless.

"Did you run all this way?" I asked, laughing softly at his ruffled appearance.

He reached up to shake the snow from his hair and nodded. "Did I miss it? She'll be so upset"

"No, it hasn't started yet." I smiled through the intense contraction I was having. The contractions had become longer and more intense over the past week, but they were still irregular. Apparently, according to the nurse and midwife, I was fine. It was normal. But it didn't feel normal to me. It hurt.

Troy was still pacing, not even glancing up at Dad when he entered the room. "Troy!" I hissed, and he stopped pacing and moved to my side, touching my arm as he leaned down to me. "What is wrong with you? All I can hear is your shoes squeaking on the tile!"

"On," he said, straightening up. "Sorry. I'm just nervous."

"Why?"

He shrugged, shaking his head as though the words he wanted to say were stuck on the tip of his tongue. He

straightened up, turning his head to the door and noticed Dad standing against the wall. Troy nearly jumped out of his skin, his hand flying over his heart.

"Goddess," he stammered. "How long have you been here, Alpha Ethan?"

Dad gave him a quizzical glance, then chuckled silently, crossing his arms over his chest. "A few minutes. You didn't notice me come in?"

"No I-i'm losing my mind, I think. Troy was pale and acting strange.

I felt a wave of unease wash over me as he glanced over at the ultrasound machine with a skeptical glaze.

“I remember the first time I saw Rowan on one of these,” Dad said, tilting his head toward the machine. “I’ll never forget it. It was incredible. He was only a tiny dot, though.”

“Do you remember seeing me on an ultrasound?” I asked sweetly, smiling at him.

He nodded, his gaze dream-like and far away. “Of course, I do. You wouldn’t stop moving, and your mom had to come in three different times to get a better image of your heart. You were a handful before you were even born.”

I frowned, glaring at him as I settled back against the pillow, sighing deeply. There had been blood drawn before the imaging appointment, and whatever they were doing with the sample was taking forever. I closed my eyes, lingering on the edge of sleep.

Troy had started pacing again, his shoes squeaking on the waxed tile floor. “Troy! Stop it!”

“I’m sorry,” he huffed, and I heard him sit down in one of the plastic chairs against the far wall!

He stood abruptly as the nurse and midwife came in, the chair screeching as he nearly knocked it on its side. I should have rolled my eyes, but something stopped me. Troy was very, very uncomfortable, almost like he could sense something.

I almost asked him what was wrong, if there was something wrong with me or the babies, but I didn’t have time. I was being instructed to lift up my sweater, and then the midwife pressed the doppler down on my belly, the gel warm and comforting against my stretched and itchy skin.

“You said you were having twins? Confirmed by another midwife, correct?” the midwife said as she ran the doppler over my belly. I nodded, explaining what Cleo had said and done in regard to my pregnancy

A minute passed, then another. I was beginning to feel uneasy.

“Okay, here’s the first heartbeat

A rhythmic thumping filled the air, embracing us. I glanced over at Troy, who was standing next to Dad, both of them standing with their arms crossed as they watched the screen. Troy wasn’t even blinking.

“And... baby number two, right here,”

Another round of rhythmic beating, and then the midwife

paused, peering at the screen with a skeptical expression on her face. She moved the doppler around, then motioned for me to turn onto my side.

The room was filled with a third heartbeat, softer, less rhythmic. It must have been my *own*.

“Three...” the midwife said, but her expression faded in an instant as she looked at the screen.

“Three what?” I asked, my voice a little shaky.

She looked down at me, her eyes creasing as he gave me a knowing smile. “Triplets.”

Troy swayed, his face draining of color. Dad caught him, holding him upright until Troy could catch his breath.

“W-what?” I stammered, the tiny space left in my body for my stomach tightening into a knot. 157

“You’re having triplets, and soon!” The midwife’s voice betrayed the look on her face, however. Something in her tone made me tighten with anxiety.

“What’s wrong?” Dad asked.

Troy had composed himself, but was still pale, his eyes trying to make sense of the picture of the screen.

It was the tiniest heart I had ever seen, fluttering faintly in grayscale. I watched it as if in a trance, counting the beats in my mind, and then I noticed it.

The rhythm was off, skipping every once in a while.

“We’re not equipped for this kind of delivery here, Alpha,” the midwife said hastily, pointing to the screen. “This baby... its heart. It’s hard to tell, but there’s an abnormality, right here—”

I zoned out, the midwife’s words fading to a faint murmur as I watched the screen. My hands went protectively around my belly, and then I felt the warmth of Troy’s hand on mine. I looked up at him, a silent barrage of questions passing between us. How?

“Was it the coffee?” I asked, my voice a strained cry of despair.

The midwife looked at me with a surprised look on her face, then she smiled sympathetically. “No... something like this starts to form very early on, likely before you even knew you were pregnant. Plus, multiples complicate things. There’s a lot

going on in the beginning, you know. Lots of cells trying to find their place all at once. This baby’s heart... just didn’t form correctly.”

“What can we do?” Troy’s voice boomed in the small space, taking command.

I took a deep, pained breath as he spoke, thankful he could be there to ask the questions I didn’t have the capacity to ask myself.

“Deliver as soon as possible. Tomorrow, if you can get her to Mirage. Their hospital is larger, they have the tools to operate on a child this size-”

“Operate?” Dad stepped forward and wrapped his fingers around my other hand.

“There’s a hole in the baby’s heart. It won’t close itself, from

what I can tell. It’ll need surgery immediately after birth if the baby is going to survive. The other two are healthy, but small. That’s normal for triplets. It’s a miracle, in my opinion, that you made it this far, Princess Maeve.”

I fought to form my mouth into a smile, but it was impossible.

“Is the hospital in Mirage even intact?” Troy asked Dad, his words full of panic.

“Y-yes. It is. We’ll go now.” Dad replied, squeezing my hand.

“No,” I cried, looking up at Dad and Troy, tears falling down my cheeks. “I can’t leave Mom!”

“You don’t have a choice, Maeve. Dad was stone-cold serious, and I felt my heart begin to shatter. Mom was very sick, growing weaker by the day. What if she wasn’t here when I came back?”

Suddenly, a wave of pure, boiling hot anger swept over me, the tears in my eyes blurring my vision. If I’d had my powers, if Mom had her powers...

“Is the baby going to die?” I said hotly, my anger flowing over. So much death had touched me in the last several months, so much heartbreak and turmoil. Our children were the silver lining to all of the grief Troy and I had been through.

And now we were going to lose one-one we hadn’t even known was there, one we hadn’t even had a chance to love.

The midwife touched my leg as she looked down at me, her eyes filled with pity. I looked away from her before I snapped.

“Do you want to know what you’re having?” she said softly.

I looked up at Troy. We already knew, based on what Una had told us. But she had been wrong about the twins. She had also been wrong about bringing the moonstones together. I had failed.

I could tell he was thinking the same thing as he looked down at me, the same anger and confusion I felt behind his own eyes. But, he nodded at the midwife, and she started moving the doppler over my belly once again.

“Three boys,” she said softly.

Dad squeezed my hand again, but his hand was trembling. I sucked in my breath, closing my eyes against the tears. I shut down, blocking out whatever the midwife had said to me and to Troy and Dad.

Why? I thought, willing the Moon Goddess to respond. What have I done to deserve this pain?

“Of course, I’m going.” Mom adjusted her weight on the kitchen stool, crossing her arms over her chest as she looked up at Dad.

Her anger at being told she was staying behind in Winter Forest while Dad escorted me and Troy to Mirage to have the babies had given her a boost of righteous energy, her cheeks coloring and eyes shining with new life.

“You are too weak-” Dad bit out, but Mom held her hand up to stop him from continuing.

Gemma’s eyes went wide as she bounced George in her lap.

“I am going. That’s final,” she said with conviction, tilting her chin in the air, “This is our daughter, Ethan. Our grandchildren.”

“No!” Dad was just as angry and upset as the rest of us, the desperation evident in his voice as he leaned across the kitchen island, his gaze locked on Mom’s face.

“Um, maybe she should go, Ethan? What if... what if she can use the moonstones to, uh, help the baby?” Gemma’s voice was timid as she spoke, glancing over at me.

I perked up, having not even considered the moonstones. I had failed in bringing them together, and my blood powers were obviously weak to the point of being nearly useless, but I had brought Troy back to life. Gemma had brought Mom back to life with a drop of Mom’s blood. And it seemed I had unknowingly done the same for Gemma in Mirage.

“She’s right,” I said quickly, ignoring Dad’s steely gaze. “If something were to happen to the one of the babies during the delivery,”

“Maeve, wait,” Troy, took my hand in his, looking into my eyes. “This is... he’s not dead, okay? There’s a problem with his heart. You brought me back with the moonstone, but my wounds still needed to heal on their own. The problem with his heart... I don’t think this is something any of us have the power to fix. He needs a special surgeon, like the midwife said.”

“It’s not fair!” I screeched, clenching my hands into fists. I got up, wobbling as I tried to squeeze past Troy and Gemma.

Rowan was standing in the kitchen near the sink, and I set my

eyes on him. I was mad. I wanted to scream. I wanted to hit something. Rowan seemed like a great target.

“Maeve, no.” Dad had read my mind it seemed. He didn’t stop me as I moved toward the hallway away from the group.

Rowan turned his head as I passed him, watching me, lest he needed to defend himself. But his face was soft and sympathetic. When I reached the threshold of the kitchen, he followed me out, pulling me to the side of the hallway out of earshot of the rest of the family who were congregating in the kitchen.

“When do you leave?”

“I don’t know. Dad said soon. It could be minutes or hours.” I was exhausted. I ran my hands over my face, my skin raw and stained from tears.

“I think we should go talk to Hanna,” he said, taking me by the shoulders and turning me towards the foyer.

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I just have a feeling she can help us.”

“She told me she doesn’t have powers anymore, Rowan. What could she possibly do?”

Rowan licked his lips, trying to gather his thoughts. “I think her lack of powers has more to do with not wanting them, Maeve. She’s fighting against them. But we need her now.”

Troy walked over to us, nodding at Rowan in greeting. “Is everything okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, we’re going to go talk to Hanna. I don’t really know what else to do to help.”

“Okay, yeah. I think that’s wise. Maeve, can I talk to you before you go?” Troy took my hand, and I nodded.

“I’ll be outside,” Rowan said, turning to walk away from us.

Troy pulled me into the empty living room, entwining his fingers in mine.

“Maeve, I know this isn’t the time to even be thinking about this but...” he tapered off, taking a deep breath. “We need to marry. Today.”

“Today?” I said with an air of marked confusion. “Why?”

“Because if... we’re already a united front. I get that. We’re partners. Mates. But I want to face whatever comes next as your husband. If something were to happen to you....”

“I understand,” I whispered, unable to hide my grief any longer. “Talk to my dad. There’s a priestess in town but... Mom can marry us. She knows the ceremony.”

Troy nodded, weighed down by a significant sadness.

This is not how I’d imagined my wedding. This was not how I imagined I’d become a mother.

Once again, I felt bound to a path where I had little choice.

I turned to the foyer where Rowan was waiting just outside, and I went to him.

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 308

Chapter 88: The Seer

Maeve

Rowan and I walked in silence along the trail that led from the house to the old village. Small log cabins were scattered through the woods, their chimneys puffing smoke that hung in the air, mingling with the falling snow.

If Dad had known I was going out for a walk with Rowan, he would’ve stopped me, making me lay down and continue to listen to everyone arguing over my condition. But I felt better in the fresh air, our slow, easy walk alleviating my stress.

“I remember feeling stuck for a long time,” Rowan said as we crunched through the stone, his voice a low whisper. “Funny how you fall into a routine for so long that time feels endless, do you know what I mean? And then one thing changes and everything is upended.”

I considered his words, breathing deeply. The air was rich with chilled moisture, and I let it course through my veins and fill my lungs, calming me. "Time moves fast in chaos," I said, finishing what he was meaning to say.

"I'm sorry I haven't spoken to you much since you got home."

"Well, I understand why after meeting that crazy old woman from Lycenna. What was her name again?"

"Oh, I don't know. I don't really care. Look, Maeve—" He turned to me, taking me by the shoulders. "I knew you were going to be okay this whole time. I knew you were fine when the letters

stopped coming. I knew...I knew you could handle whatever situation you faced after what happened in Mirage.

"I did my best to stop Mom and Dad from acting on impulse and starting a war with Poldesse over your disappearance. But we're in deep now. I can't make heads or tails of what we need to do. It sounds like an absolute shitstorm is coming our way, and I need you on my side."

"Of-of course, Rowan. What the hell else would I be doing?"

Rowan pursed his lips, squeezing my shoulders. "I like Troy. I really do."

"I like him too," I laughed, missing Troy immensely. The only time we seemed to have with each other was late at night, sleeping in the same way we used to sleep on the Persephone before I forgave him, when he'd sleep on the floor while I slept in the bed, our fingers knitted together.

Now we slept that way because we couldn't fit comfortably in the same small bed with my stomach in the way, but it still felt intimate.

"I think you'll like Hanna. But she's different, okay? Quiet. She doesn't tend to speak unless spoken to. I don't want you to be... mean. Got it? Can you just cool it, for a few minutes, and let her help *you*?"

"I'm not mean!" I swatted him, and he let go of my shoulders, arching his brow.

"Just let me lead, alright?"

"Sure," I huffed, falling back in step as we continued through

the woods. The only light was that of lanterns hung on the porches we passed, and every once in a while, a wolf darted past us in the distance.

I wondered if Rowan had taken Troy out in their wolf forms yet to explore. It was something I had always wanted to do when I came into my powers. And now I likely would never have the chance.

“Things are complicated between Hanna and me. She’s struggling.”

“With what?”

“What all of this means for her, for us. Imagine someone telling you you’re going to be the mother of the second coming of the Moon Goddess. That would freak anyone out.”

“I can’t believe that woman actually said that to her. I was shocked, and people have been telling me crazy things for months now. We’re in a living, breathing fairytale, Rowan.”

“Better buckle up, huh? What a fucking ride.”

I smiled, tucking my chilled fingers in my pockets. I could tell Rowan wanted to say more, but he was struggling to form the words. Rowan thought before he spoke, something I had yet to fully master. He was going to make a great Alpha one day.

Before long, we reached a cabin nestled against a rocky bluff on the outskirts of the old village. Rowan helped me up the steps, which were slick with ice. “There’s ice-melt in the garage”

“You think I’m going to drag a bag of ice-melt all the way

over here?” he laughed, shaking his head as he knocked lightly on the door before turning the knob. “I’ll chip the ice away when it stops snowing.”

“Mhm,” I murmured, and then I walked into the cabin.

Hanna was standing in the kitchen in front of the stove, her hands tucked into floral print oven mitts. She was pouring a cup of tea, and seemed surprised to see us. Me, at least.

I looked around at the cabin, which was furnished comfortably but sparsely decorated. It was a small space, an open kitchen and living room with two bedrooms in the back, typical for the cabins of the old village.

Most people lived in the newer houses near the coastline, which were larger and more modern. This space was quaint, charming, and despite the cold weather, felt nice and cozy.

“Hey,” Rowan said gently. There was an odd catch to his voice.

I noticed a large suitcase in the living room, its lid open. It was empty, however.

“Are you going somewhere?” I asked her without thinking.

She blinked, looking from me to Rowan.

“Uh,” Rowan ran his fingers through his hair as he looked at Hanna, a silent conversation passing between them. Her eyes softened, and I noticed some of the tension leave Rowan’s shoulders. “We’re moving to Mirage.”

“Why?” I asked, unable to hide my surprise.

“Dad’s making me the new Alpha of Drogomor.”

“Since when?” I stammered.

“Since a few days ago. I found out the same day the Lycennians arrived.”

“No one tells me anything!” I said, throwing my hands in the air.

Hanna gave me a crooked smile, then reached into an upper cabinet for two extra mugs and began pouring tea.

“Does this mean Ernest and Gemma are staying in Winter Forest?” I asked.

Rowan nodded, bending down to unlace his boots.

“This is huge, Rowan. You’re an Alpha now!” I exclaimed, plopping down on the couch. I was thankful for the distraction of Rowan’s big news, especially since Hanna was being silent as a mouse. I felt oddly intimidated by her.

“Have you met Kacidra yet? Your friend Pete’s mate?” Rowan asked as he went into the kitchen. He gave Hanna the softest, most loving smile I had ever seen, but there was significant

sadness there. What was going on with these two?

“No, I haven’t seen Pete since we arrived. Troy told me I needed to leave him alone for a while.”

“He’s been kept busy by my sister, I’m afraid,” Hanna said, her voice much lighter than her commanding tone in the library.

A wave of recognition swept over me once again, and I turned to her, unable to stop myself from speaking. “You gave me the ring, didn’t you? Months ago. The red ring”

“I—I did. I don’t know why I thought you needed it—”

“You saved my life,” I said weakly, trying to make sense of it. All of it.

Hanna only nodded, looking exceedingly forlorn. As much as I needed to talk to her about how her powers connected to me and everything I had been through over the past several months, I found myself wanting answers about Rowan and Hanna’s weird behavior.

“What’s wrong with you two? Are you fighting?”

“Maeve! What did I say,” Rowan bit out, his cheeks reddening with a furious blush.

Hanna didn’t look at all shocked, however. She stepped around the kitchen counter and walked over to me, handing me a mug of floral-scented tea.

“I feel like I need to go back to Red Lakes and take the stones with me, to lead Tasia away from Winter Forest.” Hanna set her own mug on top of the wood stove to keep it warm as she stoked the fire.

I looked into my tea, considering her plan. “Well, that won’t matter. She wants Mom dead, for one. She failed the first time she tried to kill her, from what I understand.” I said.

Hanna turned to look at me, pondering my words. She looked as though she hadn’t considered that before.

“So why leave? I know Red Lakes doesn’t have the army you’d need to defend the village if Tasia comes.”

“I don’t think this fight will be traditionally fought,” Hanna

quipped as she sat down on the other end of the couch. Rowan sat down on the floor next to the wood stove, crossing his legs and balancing his mug of tea on his knee.

“I think Tasia will want to fight... me. And I failed to protect your mother and the temple.”

“You didn’t fail, Hanna. You and Mom didn’t know what you were getting into,” Rowan said, trying to reassure her.

“Well, it would be silly to leave. Rowan needs you, for one. I’ve never seen him so lovesick. And he’s going to need your support as Luna when you go to Mirage.”

Rowan gave me a dirty look but kept his mouth shut.

“And,” I continued, pausing to sip from my tea, “I need you. I don’t understand our connection. I don’t have my powers; they never came. But you and I... I truly feel like we’re supposed to be working together somehow.”

“It’s dangerous, Maeve.” Hanna looked down at her tea, her face lined with uncertainty.

“I survived a shipwreck, a Lycaonic cult, and Opaline, that crazy Lycennian woman. I think I can handle whatever comes next.” I couldn’t help but smile around Opaline’s name, knowing she was being kept prisoner in one of the rooms in the castle.

Hanna exhaled deeply, then glanced at Rowan. “I need time.”

“I know,” Rowan whispered, looking abjectly heartbroken.

I sat in awkward silence for a moment, watching them just stare at each other. I wanted to say that if I could make it work

with Troy and forgive him, Hanna and Rowan could work through whatever it was that was holding them back from leaning into their mate bond.

But I wasn't here to play matchmaker. In fact, I wasn't entirely sure why I was here.

I gave Rowan a look that said 'get on with it,' and he nodded tightly, turning his gaze back to Hanna.

"We need your help," he said, explaining the situation in detail.

Hanna turned her gaze to me as Rowan explained what was happening with the triplets, and her gaze wavered when he started to talk about the third baby's heart, and the plan to go to Mirage to deliver as soon as the seaplane was ready.

Rowan paused for a long moment, gathering his thoughts. I shifted uncomfortably on the couch, my stomach tightening and relaxing several times in quick succession.

"What can I do?" Hanna's voice was edged with sadness as she looked from Rowan to me, her dark eyes shining in the soft amber glow of the wood stove.

I shrugged helplessly, wondering why the hell Rowan would even ask her.

"Well, I was thinking because... you know. They're in water?"

"Rowan? Are you serious?" I exclaimed. "You want her to try to Dream Dance in-"

But Hanna laughed, interrupting my outburst. We both turned to her, surprised by the sound. She had a nice laugh and an even nicer smile. She was beautiful when she smiled, and I

could see the longing flash behind Rowan's eyes as he looked at her.

"I can't do that. It doesn't work like that," she said as she caught her breath.

"But-" Rowan began.

"Could you tell me, at least, if they survive? Can you do what that old woman can do? See into the future?" I asked, internally debating whether or not I actually wanted to know.

Hanna considered my question, then shook her head. “I don’t know how. I’ve never been able to conjure visions before. I... / wouldn’t even know how to begin.”

I tried not to feel defeated as I looked into my tea. I just wanted to know. I needed to know if I was going to lose the baby I hadn’t even known was there. I needed to know if I had a chance to love him before I needed to grieve his loss.

I didn’t notice Hanna moving closer to me. She was next to me now, and she placed her hand on my thigh. A moment of silence passed between us, and I looked into her eyes. Then she placed her hand on my stomach.

Hanna

Show me, I prayed, picturing the young white-haired woman from my dream for some reason. I waited, my hand on Maeve’s belly, marveling as I felt the life within trembling against my touch.

Nothing happened. Not for a long time. I heard Rowan stand

up and open the wood stove. Maeve had spoken to him. Someone had said my name,

Time was moving without rhythm, it seemed. I focused my energy on the tangled movements of the children within her womb. I felt like I could feel their heartbeats against the palm of my hand as I closed my eyes, imagining them growing and changing as they neared the time of the birth.

But then my mind went blank. I pictured the temple again, and the girl at the altar. Her tear-filled eyes were biting into my heart. ‘Show me, please,’ I whispered.

Grainy images passed behind my eyes in rapid succession, the people within the images blurred to the point of being unrecognizable. But then they began to slow, giving me a clearer view of the figures as though I were looking at them in a photo.

My skin felt warm as I opened my eyes. I was standing in a large, tropical garden. Monstera vines snaked up several large palm trees, their vines thick

with strange fruit. The path in front of me was overgrown with Vivid green plants I couldn't name.

I looked up, seeing Maeve and Troy standing together in the distance, talking in hushed voices.

"We need to talk about this, Maeve. Ethan is expecting an answer," Troy said, touching her on the arm.

Maeve looked up at him, her eyes clouded with heavy

emotion. "How are we supposed to choose between them?"

Troy shook his head, "He's the obvious choice for succession.

They'll be twenty-one soon; we need to have a plan."

I wanted to speak, to ask who they were talking about, but no sound came from my mouth.

"Hanna told us what would happen if he ascended the throne instead of his brother. Before she-she-" Maeve hung her head, looking away from Troy.

Troy pulled her into an embrace, stroking her cheek.

"But between the two of them... Maeve, we have to be rational."

Two. Just two. I blinked, seeing nothing but darkness. Then I slowly began to come back to reality, my chest tightening with unease.

Maeve was staring at me, her eyes glistening with tears. "You saw something, didn't you?" she said as I took my hand over from her stomach.

I nodded, glancing at Rowan before taking a deep breath.

"Two," I said. "There will be two."

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 309

Chapter 89 : Babies on a Plane

Maeve

I kept my mind blank for the rest of the evening. I couldn't form a rational thought if I tried. Hanna had told me what she'd seen but was adamant she wasn't sure what it meant. The fact that she was unsure was the only shred of hope I had left.

I was laying in bed in my room, my eyes fixated on the far wall. Troy was packing, stuffing clothes into a suitcase as he rifled through my dresser, grabbing whatever he could get his hands on.

We hadn't spoken since I'd left the house with Rowan. Troy had been down at the dock for most of the evening with Dad, deciding whether or not the plane could taxi safely out of the inlet. They decided we'd be leaving on the next tide, which was now only an hour away.

I didn't tell him what Hanna saw. That she had seen us, twenty years from now. At least, I thought, we would still have each other.

Troy was leaning on the suitcase, using his weight to close it enough to zip it up. I couldn't help but smile as I watched him. He was frantic, his hair ruffled and his shirt wrinkled as he pushed against the suitcase, cursing under his breath.

"What do you think Keaton and Myla are up to right now?" | asked.

He stood to his full height, running his fingers through his hair and then over his face, which he had kept clean-shaven despite the busyness of the past several days.

"Hopefully they got to Robbie. I plan on checking with the Port Master while we're in Mirage. Maybe I can find out if they've been in Valoria recently. That would tell us... tell us everything went okay when they reached Dianny."

"But what do you think they're doing right now, right this minute?" | asked again, not wanting to think about what Damian had told me about what Tasia had done in Dianny.

Troy sat on the edge of the bed, leaning over me. He kissed me softly, brushing his lips against mine. "Well, it'll be very late, wherever they are. Hopefully, they're sleeping."

"Sleep sounds nice," I whispered, stifling a yawn.

“You can sleep on the plane,” he kissed me again, this time it was deeper. I melted against him, wanting nothing more than to have him wrap his arms around me while I drifted into sleep.

“I love you, Maeve. Everything is going to be okay. I know you’re hurting. I am too. We’re going to make it through this. All of us,” he said as he placed his hand over the swell of my belly. “I promise.”

“Don’t promise me,” I sniffled, the tears threatening to spill again. “I... I don’t even want to think about what’s going to happen next. I just want to keep him for a little longer. He’s safe with me. He’s-he’s still there.”

“I know,” Troy’s voice broke with emotion as he pressed his forehead against mine. “I’m so sorry, Maeve.”

“You knew something was wrong, didn’t you? Before the ultrasound, you were acting so strange.”

“I had a feeling. I could just feel something wasn’t right. I feel those things in you, you know. I can feel when you’re hurting. I

feel it when you smile, too. That’s what mates are, an extension of the other person. A shared soul.”

“I wish I could feel those things with you, I’m sorry I can’t.” || began to cry again, for the zillionth time today.

Troy wrapped me in his arms and held me against his chest. “You’re stronger than you give yourself credit for. We’re going to get through this. I promise you, Maeve. Whatever the outcome, I’m here.”

Dad was talking to the pilot as the rest of us settled into the plane. Troy was picking at his jeans, looking through the window at the dock where Rowan and Ernest were standing, waiting for us to take off.

“You’ve never been on a plane before, have you?” Mom said to Troy, who turned his head to look at her. She was wrapped in a thick blanket and sitting in one of the seats across the aisle, dark circles under her eyes and her skin pale in the dim light.

Troy shook his head, looking a little pale himself.

“Steven is a great pilot. We’ll be just fine,” she said.

Dad was making his way out of the cockpit. He stopped, turning to close the door, and waved at Ernest and Rowan while snapping the door shut and locking it in place. “Are we ready?”

I nodded, even though the last thing I wanted to do was this. The plane had already been running for a while, and the cabin was cozy and filled with vibrations. Sleep was already taking over, but I’d promised Troy I would stay awake at least until the plane took off.

Even though I could tell he was nervous, and I knew he had been asking

27 561

Dad a barrage of questions about how exactly this hunk of metal was able to zoom through the air. Mom said Dad told him it was because of magic just to stop Troy from continuing to ask him questions about the physics involved, but I didn’t know if Troy believed them.

Troy had packed me a book to read. I wondered if he knew it was my favorite based on how worn the cover was. I pulled it out of the bag he’d packed for me, which was full of random snacks and a pair of socks, for some reason.

Then just as the plane began to move toward the breakwater, I took his hand in mine, squeezing. “Steven won’t let us crash, I promise.”

Troy grunted in response, but he squeezed my hand back nonetheless.

I fell asleep before the plane made it into the air, lingering on the edge of deep sleep for the majority of the flight. I didn’t dream. All there was, was darkness.

Steven’s voice over the intercom woke me from my nap. I rubbed my eyes, turning toward the darkened window and finding Troy’s seat empty.

I looked around, seeing Mom asleep with her head against the window, and Dad and Troy seated further up the cabin, talking in hushed voices. I stood, waddling over to them and took a seat next to Troy. They were playing chess.

“You said you never played chess with other people,” I griped at Dad.

He arched his brow in response, then looked down to ponder Troy's latest move. "I said I'd never play chess with YOU people, as in you and Rowan. Troy's a capable opponent."

"Well, chess is boring." I cracked out my book, pretending to be invested in the first page, which I had already read a thousand times and could probably recite word for word if asked.

Dad moved one of his pieces on the collapsible board after a long moment of contemplation, giving Troy a careful eye. Troy didn't hesitate, however, taking out two of Dad's pieces in a matter of seconds. Dad was shocked, and straightened his back.

"Oh, well... now I see how you could have done that," Dad said in a hoarse, somewhat annoyed whisper.

I snickered to myself, dramatically flipping a page of the book. "How much longer until we're in Mirage?" I asked, finding it harder and harder to find a comfortable position in the cramped airplane seats.

Troy was watching me closely as I shifted my weight. I wondered if he could feel the pain in my hips and back that seemed to radiate up and down my spine the same way I could, or if he could only tell I was increasingly uncomfortable.

"Two hours, roughly," Dad moved another piece, and Troy swiftly took out his queen, ending the game. "Damn. Who taught you how to play like this?"

"A man I knew in the Isles," Troy said, leaning back and looking pleased with himself. "I'm afraid I'm a little rusty."

Dad glared at him, then turned to me, his gaze raking over my face. "How you feeling, kid?"

"Like hell," I bit out. "I'm hungry."

"I packed some snacks in the bag. I'll go get them -" Troy stood, but I waved my hand in dismissal, clutching his arm in support as I rose from my own seat.

"I'll go get it. I want to walk for a minute. I'll just pace'up and down the aisle for a moment."

Dad gave me a weary eye, but I turned away, beginning my jaunt up and down the narrow pathway between the seats.

This went on for the next thirty minutes. Walking eased the pain in my back, but every once in a while, I had to stop to lean against the back of one of the chairs to catch my breath.

These babies were squeezed up against my heart, and I felt as though my heart was working overtime to work properly in the small space it had to function. After a while, Dad waved me over again, motioning for me to sit down and rest for a minute.

"I don't like your coloring, Maeve. You're gray," he said stern

1. ly.

"I'm fine. I'm just ready to be off this plane. I feel like the walls are caving in on me."

"Soon, we'll be there soon." Dad glanced back at Mom, who was still asleep. "Look, Troy and I have been talking. He told me the two of you are planning to marry, like now."

I glanced at Troy, who colored. "Yeah, we discussed it," I said, even though the conversation had only been a few sentences long.

"I know I said I wanted the two of you married before the pregnancy ended.... Look, I like you Troy. I trust you, most importantly. This situation has obviously changed things. I knew we talked about this before we got on the plane, but I want to reiterate that if the two of you wanted to wait—"

"You guys talked about this without me?" I said through gritted teeth as a wave of pain washed over me. I felt light-headed,

taking my head in my hands to stop myself from passing out.

"Goddess, Maeve, are you okay?" Dad's hand came down on my back just as Troy knelt in the tight space in front of me, looking up into my face.

"What's wrong?" he pleaded.

“It hurts!” | sobbed, unable to stop myself from crying as another tightening pain wrapped itself over my stomach and back. I cried out, which woke Mom, and suddenly she was standing over the three of us.

“You have to breathe through them, honey. You’re having a contraction”

“I f*cking know that!” | cried, biting my lip so hard that I drew blood. I had the sudden urge to stand, wanting space. I fought against everyone’s hold on me, swatting Troy and Dad away. “Get off of me!”

“Maeve, sit down!” Dad barked, his voice causing Steven to turn his head to see what was going on.

“Don’t touch-don’t touch me! I don’t want to have-have them yet. I don’t want to! I can’t! I can’t say goodbye!” | screamed as another contraction ripped me in half, at least it felt like it.

Mom wrapped her arms around me, her chin resting on my shoulder as she whispered in my ear, reminding me to breathe.

There was a popping sound, like a rubber band snapping. Everyone quieted as a gush of water burst from between my legs. “Oh, Goddess,” I laughed, absolutely delirious. “Steven, I’m sorry about the floor-”

“Sit her down, now!” Dad was red in the face, but I could feel Mom shaking her head.

“Give her some space, both of you! Steven, how much longer?”

I didn’t hear what he said. The world around me started to spin. I was trembling, finding it hard to breathe.

“Maeve? Oh, oh, no. No, no NO!” Mom’s voice was the last thing I heard, and then it all went black.

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 310

Chapter 90 : Heartbeat

Troy

Chaos wasn't the right word to describe what had happened. I watched in horror as Maeve collapsed in Rosalie's arms, her eyes going still and sightless.

Ethan was screaming at the pilot to land the plane, and suddenly we were plummeting to the ground, holding on for dear life as the plane landed roughly in a field just outside of Mirage.

Ethan told me it would be a bumpy landing, even though this seaplane was equipped to land on the ground. Still, it needed a runway, and all we had was a field.

I carried Maeve out of the plane, Ethan close behind me with Rosalie in his arms. Steven was talking frantically into a radio, trying to find someone to help us, to help Maeve, who was panting in my arms as I laid her down in the grass.

"Warriors are on their way; they're going to get her to the hospital. It's only only half an hour from here-" Ethan stammered as he struggled with Rosalie, who was fighting against him.

"Let me go, Ethan!" she snapped.

"You need to calm down!" he retorted, but she elbowed him sharply in the chest, and he loosened his grip just enough for her to dart forward, landing on her knees in front of Maeve, "Troy, we can shift. We can carry the women-" Ethan said.

I looked down to see Maeve's eyelashes fluttering. "I don't want to have these babies in the grass. That would be... be silly." Maeve said weakly, her mouth twitching into a smile.

I could feel her energy waning. Every minute that passed felt like a lifetime as we waited for help. Maeve cried out in pain, and I felt absolutely helpless.

"Something's wrong!" she said, over and over.

Rosalie was praying, running her fingers through Maeve's hair. Rosalie looked at me, her eyes full of tears.

“We need to deliver them, right now,” I said, not sure how the words had even formed in my mouth. I hadn’t meant to say it; hadn’t even been thinking about it.

“How?” Rosalie pleaded.

She looked exhausted; her face twisted in pain. Goddess, it felt like Ethan and I were about to lose them both.

“Do you have the moonstones?” Ethan’s voice sounded out behind me, and I turned to look at him, nodding.

“In the plane,” I answered quickly, turning back to Maeve, who was gripping my hand.

She was gray in color, her arms trembling in the wet chill of the air. I took off my sweater and draped it over her, trying to keep her warm.

“Troy, I wanted to get married,”

“We’re going to get married, Maeve. I promise,” I choked, trying to maintain my composure.

“What about right now? Just so I can say... can say we did it...”

“What are you talking about?” I laughed, despite the situation.

She gave me one last soft smile, then her eyes began to close.

“Stay awake, honey, please!” Rosalie shook her awake, and Maeve groaned, shaking her head rapidly from side to side.

“Something’s wrong. Something’s-” Maeve’s words were jumbled, then ceased completely.

“Fine, fine. Let’s get married right now. Okay? This is our wedding, underneath the stars. Under the moon. Open your eyes, Maeve! Do you see it? The moon is so clear out here. There’s no snow. The stars are out-” I was rambling, absolutely desperate.

Ethan plowed into me, almost knocking me over as he slipped in the wet grass.

“Got them,”

I grabbed him by the jacket, shaking him. “Where is it? That ring? We need it, now!” I could barely believe the tone I just took with my future father-in-law.

Ethan fumbled with his pockets, his breath coming in quick rasps as he searched. He found the ring, which was a simple gold band with a dainty clear stone in a shallow setting, and dropped it into my hand with the moonstones. He looked me in the eyes and nodded. I nodded back.

I turned back to Maeve, looking down at her, admiring her, taking in every inch of her. I slowly handed the moonstones to Rosalie.

She wrapped her fingers around the stones, and I saw the faintest hint of red within her palm. I hadn’t realized she had injured herself during the rough landing, but the timing couldn’t have been more perfect.

27073 She leaned over Maeve, kissing her on the forehead before

placing the stones on her chest, holding her hand over them. Rosalie said the ceremony that bound Maeve and I as husband and wife, but I found myself focusing on the ring in my hand.

Ethan had pulled me aside in Winter Forest before we left and brought me into his office. He pulled a small box from the safe beneath his desk, explaining that the ring was a gift from his brother to Rosalie, and Rosalie wanted Maeve to have it eventual

1. ly.

I had no ring to give her. I had nothing to my name besides the clothes on my back, and even those were borrowed.

This is not how I imagined this moment in our lives together.

And now I held the ring in my hand, turning it over in my palm as Rosalie’s strained words filled the air around us. Rosalie nodded at me, and I took Maeve’s hand. Maeve was still, her eyes fixated on the sky.

I slipped the ring on her finger and laid her hand over the moonstones.

There was a soft rumbling beneath us, an earthquake it seemed. Goddess, could we catch a f*cking break?

“What is that?” Ethan said, looking around.

I felt adrenaline prickle across my skin as I looked up from Maeve’s face.

“Is the-the airplane about to blow up? What’s that sound?” | said as my ears began to ring.

I turned to Ethan, who was looking at Rosalie, who was on her knees next to Maeve, her eyes downcast as she looked at Maeve’s hand.

The stone in the ring was glowing.

“Oh, Goddess. It’s a moon,”

I was thrown backward by a force I didn’t have the words to explain. It felt like I was moving in slow motion, a blinding light passing over me, and through me, as I flew through the air. I hit the ground, knocking my head against the ground, which sent a sharp pain shooting down my spine.

Why was I here again? I thought, my mind unable to process anything besides the pain radiating through my body. I heard voices around me, someone shouting orders and the sound of wolves huffing and panting as they ran by.

Suddenly, Ethan was standing over me, looking down at me in concern.

“Do you realize what just happened?” he shouted, reaching down to pull pieces of grass from my hair.

“What-where’s Maeve?”

The hospital in Mirage was nothing like I’d ever seen. The bright fluorescent lights were blinding, and the air was sterile, smelling sharply of cleaning solution.

It was a far cry from the cozy clinic in Winter Forest with its wood-paneled walls and yellow paint, and even further from the stone-walled infirmary at the castle where Maeve and I had both prepared for the pregnancy that was now risking her life.

People dressed in scrubs and crisp white coats hovered around the room where I was standing, shell-shocked, their voices a faint murmur in my still ringing ears.

Amniotic fluid embolism, low blood pressure, potential heart failure, cesarean section.

The words felt heavy and unfamiliar as I tried to wrap my head around what was currently happening, and what had happened when I slipped that unassuming ring on Maeve's finger only an hour ago.

A nurse was actively trying to explain it all to us, but I could barely understand her. Ethan was standing next to me, clutching Rosalie's hand so tightly her fingers were turning white.

We were helpless, watching Maeve suffer right before our eyes.

"We'll do what we can, but she's far gone. It's a miracle her heart is still beating. We can likely save at least two of the triplets, but the third's heart defect is severe."

"Enough!" I shouted, squaring my shoulders as though about to enter into a fight. I drew in my breath, letting the cool, bleach-thick air fill my lungs. "No."

"No, what?" the nurse stammered, taken aback by my outburst.

The handful of nurses and doctors in the room turned to me, which gave me a glimpse of Maeve laying limp on the hospital bed they were surrounding.

She was pale, her hair falling loose over her shoulders. Rosalie let out a choked sob behind me as she looked past me at the person we all loved... and weren't ready to lose.

"Just, no. No! There has to be something-any-anything you can do for her," I stuttered, damn near ready to drop on my knees and beg.

The ring had been the missing link to the moonstones. We had inadvertently brought them together in that Goddess-forsaken field, and we had no idea what was supposed to happen next. Hadn't Una said something about immortality? Hadn't the stones been the key to saving Rosalie and getting her healing powers back? If so, why was Maeve still in such an awful way? It didn't make sense.

“Queen Rosalie.” | turned to her, unable to hide the pain behind my eyes. She nodded, clutching Ethan’s arm for support. “You need to help her. We need your blood,”

“I lost my powers, Troy. I c-can’t!” She was desperate, her eyes spilling over with hot, angry tears.

Ethan opened his mouth to speak, but I cut him off, not caring about the consequences or the fact that I had been walking on eggshells with him since the day I met him.

“You have to do it. You have to. We brought the f*cking moonstones together. That has to mean something. You’re going to try!” | commanded. I didn’t recognize my own voice at that moment.

“Alpha King, we need to deliver these infants now, before we lose them all,” said a man, a doctor, dressed in a starched white jacket.

Ethan continued to look at me, however, his eyes searching my face. To my surprise, he pushed Rosalie toward me, nodding

slowly as he accepted my demand.

The next thirty minutes were a blur. Rosalie, Ethan, and I were dressed in blue outfits that felt as though they were made of paper. Maeve was completely sedated, which made me furious and caused my heart to shatter into pieces. Ethan had to promise he’d stay out of the way, no matter what, in order for them to let

him into the room.

She had been talking non-stop about what it would be like to see her babies being born, how it would feel, how she would feel. She wasn’t scared. She was looking forward to it, wanting nothing more than to bear witness to the process. And now she would miss every second.

I had no choice but to swallow my anger as the surgery began. One by one, the boys were born, the doctors handing them off to nurses in rapid succession. Rosalie woke up, it seemed, her voice carrying through the operating room as she pushed past the nurses handling the tiniest infants I had ever seen in my life.

The smallest one, the one we had only known about for two days, was born last.

He wasn't breathing.

I didn't take my eyes off Maeve. I cradled her face between my hands and cried as I heard Rosalie raising all kinds of hell on the opposite end of the room. A clang rang out, the sound of equipment hitting the floor and small instruments scattering across the white tile. Please, I thought. Rosalie, please. Save him.

I was counting the minutes, with the numbers clicking through my mind the only thing keeping me upright at that point. There was a commotion behind the curtain, doctors scrambling as the beeping of the heart monitor next to us began to slow, and then stop.

Rosalie nearly tackled me to the ground in her efforts to get to Maeve. I watched in slow motion as she held her bloodied hand to Maeve's mouth, Rosalie's lips moving in a rapid, desper

ate prayer.

I watched the heart monitor's screen.

Please.

Come on, please!

Maeve's hand was limp, her arm laying over the side of the operating table. The ring was still on her finger, and I noticed it begin to glow, faintly at first, then so bright it rivaled the fluorescent lights over our heads.

Rosalie took a step backward, her entire body trembling. I caught her before she fell, holding her upright as the doctors continued their attempts to save Maeve's life.

A baby cried, and I let the tears fall. Please, Goddess. Don't take their mother.

A pair of nurses were talking to me, trying to coax me into letting Rosalie go. Rosalie had passed out and was limp in my arms, but I hadn't even noticed. I was watching the screen, holding my breath, watching, waiting to see if Maeve's heart was going to beat again.

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 311

Chapter 91 : Little One

Rosalie

“Rosalie,” Ethan whispered.

I opened my eyes to his voice, his face only inches from mine. The dream I had been having disintegrated and fell back into the furthest recesses of my mind, the calm silence of sleep interrupted by background noise; papers rustling and the foot steps of someone unfamiliar walking by.

“Maeve’s awake. She’s alright. Troy is with the boys.”

“The boys? On-” I sat upright, expecting to feel pain, but I felt... nothing. I turned to Ethan slowly, gooseflesh prickling across my skin.

He smiled, tears welling in his eyes. “Everyone’s okay. Even the little one. He’s-he’s perfect, honey. I mean -” Ethan looked like he was about to cry. He was choking on the words.

I pulled him into me, my hand on the back of his head as he knelt between my knees. He crumbled in my arms, and I let my own tears fall into his hair.

Oh, Goddess. They were okay. It had worked. I had my powers again.

“Is the baby... is his heart...” I couldn’t finish the sentence without breaking down.

Ethan nodded, his strained laugh making us both tremble. “The doctors checked him out. The hole is gone, almost like it was never there. He is small though; I’ve never seen anything so

small. Barely three pounds.”

“Oh, my,” I said, unable to stop myself from smiling. “That is very small.”

“He has no hair, but the other two are – they have very fine red hair, like Maeve did when she was born. Troy had the boys put in a room together, even the little one. He didn’t want them separated. He said it-it was all they knew. They only knew each other.”

“He’s right,” I said, hiccupping. “Oh, I want to see Maeve. Have you seen her yet, since-”

I lifted my head off of his and looked around for the first time. We were in the hospital in Mirage, in a small waiting room. I felt a prickle of unease as I looked around, and Ethan noticed my change in demeanor.

This was one of the only places not touched by Damian’s invasion, but it still carried the weight of the memory of those injured during the battle that took place in the city. He looked up at me, then rose to his feet, holding out his hand.

“How do you feel, Grandma?”

I beamed, his words erasing any and all apprehension.

“I feel like new. Let’s go see our daughter.”

Ethan

Maeve was sitting upright in the hospital bed, a smug grin on her face as we sat around her, each of us holding one of her many babies. She had just been dead, and upon hearing Troy’s retelling of the birth I was absolutely shocked to see her sitting up

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right, talking to us. Overall, he was jolly and light hearted.

“You have a litter,” I said, not even trying to hold back the pure joy in my voice as I looked down at the almost microscopic bundle in my arms.

He was the smallest one of the bunch, so tiny I could practically hold his entire body in the palm of one hand. But he was healthy and strong, his coloring a robust pink against the pale yellow swaddle he was wrapped in.

“What’s in his nose?” I asked.

“It’s called a nasogastric tube,” Maeve said, matter-of-factly, sipping from a huge cup of water. She seemed pleased as she watched all of us obsess over her creations.

“It’s to help him eat, I guess. He doesn’t need it though. He nursed just fine about an hour ago. And those two brutes-” she pointed to the bundles in Troy and Rosalie’s arms, “had no issues whatsoever. I’m surprised I have nipples left.”

I rolled my eyes. Maeve rarely had a filter, even in front of me. Troy colored, however, glancing at me through his lashes before abruptly looking away. He was absolutely exhausted.

I was very proud of him for how he’d handled himself over the past day and a half. And even though I still had my doubts about his abilities to run an entire pack on his own, there wasn’t anyone else I would trust with my daughter.

He loved her, that was obvious. And watching him beam down at his newborn sons made the tension loosen in my shoulders.

There had been a time when I thought he was after something. He had explained Romero’s desires to me, letting me know he kept that part of the scheme a secret from Maeve.

Romero was dead, and Troy didn’t think it was necessary to tell her about his desire for White Queen blood to mingle with their family tree.

These boys weren’t pawns in Troy’s quest for control, because Troy wasn’t on such a quest. His world revolved around Maeve, and for that I was grateful. He had just saved her life and brought Rosalie back into her powers.

“What’s wrong, Dad?”

I turned to Maeve, who blinked, watching with suspicion.

“Nothing just... lost in thought.”

“Do you think these two are identical?” Rosalie leaned into Troy to compare the two babies they were holding. I looked back down at the little one, who was looking up at me, his irises nearly black, even under the dimmed fluorescent lights.

I thought I could see a hint of blue in one eye, but the other was obsidian in color. I remembered Rowan and Maeve’s eyes looking like that once and how we marveled at the dramatic transformation their eyes took over the next few weeks.

“Hello,” I said softly to the baby in my arms.

He stared up at me, opening his mouth just a little into what I was sure was the beginning of a smile.

“I hope they’re not identical. I’m already having a hard time telling those two apart.” Maeve reached for the apple on the table next to the bed, rolling it in her hands. She looked slightly un-nerved and had dark circles under her eyes.

If we hadn’t just been through hell and back, I would have chalked it up to the fact that she just gave birth to triplets, but there was much more to the pain hidden there.

“We’ll be able to tell regardless. Right?” Troy sounded skeptical, glancing over at Rosalie for reassurance. I smiled softly to myself, taking what felt like the first deep breath I had inhaled in months.

We sat holding the newest additions to our family for a long while, the one in my arms eventually falling asleep. I reached up and ran a finger across his cheek, marveling at the miracle that was my grandson.

“Well, one of them is going to be Charles. Charlie.” Troy looked down at the baby he was holding, tilting his head to the side before glancing at the one in Rosalie’s arms. “I think he’s Charlie. He just looks like that’s his name.” He pointed to Rosalie’s bundle with a grin.

“Well, hi Charlie,” Rosalie said sweetly, giving the baby a huge grin. Goddess, I hadn’t seen her smile like that in a long time.

“We didn’t really talk about their names, to be honest. We’ve been rather preoccupied.” Maeve was now eating a sandwich to go with the three apples she had devoured in the last half hour. “Troy wanted to name one of them Charles because of the journal he found in Lycaon’s tomb. I thought it was a great idea, especially after reading it. He sounded like a brave man, and he was definitely interesting. Troy wanted to honor him in some way.”

“Charles is a fine name. A strong one.” I shifted the little one’s weight in my arms, wondering silently what name they planned for him.

“I like Gabriel,” Maeve said.

“What do you think about William?” Rosalie asked.

“William is a nice one,” Troy agreed, looking down at the

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baby in his arms. “Is that your name?”

The baby squirmed, cooing. Rosalie grinned broadly, nodding her head. “I think that’s it. William. It’s a family name, if you think about it.”

“Oh, yeah. It is, isn’t it?” Maeve smiled, popping open a bag of chips.

“Was it your father’s name?” Troy asked Rosalie.

Rosalie’s eyes went wide, and she shook her head, chuckling. “Oh, no. We don’t talk about him.”

“Oh...” Troy looked a little embarrassed as he cleared his throat.

“My mother’s name was Willa,” Rosalie replied, patting Troy on the shoulder.

“What about him?” I asked, motioning toward the sleeping infant in my arms. I had already decided his name was “Little One,” at least to me.

“He needs something powerful, something with meaning.” Maeve crinkled the chip bag loudly, looking at us for direction. “Well, start calling out names!”

We bounced a handful of names around the room, such as Patroclus, Augustus, Frederick, and Theodore. Maeve turned her nose up at each one, even though Troy seemed willing to give the poor kid any name in the book at that point.

Finally, we exhausted our efforts, slumping back against our chairs as we took turns handing the babies off to Maeve to be fed.

“What do you think of the name Soren?” Troy asked nonchalantly, sipping coffee from a paper cup while he held Little One

against his shoulder.

I almost dropped Charlie, who I was now holding, out of shock. I figured Maeve had told Troy about her Uncle Soren, but to name their child after him was an odd choice.

Soren had been closer to Rowan, and had been sporadically in Maeve and Rowan's lives, but never around long enough to form much of a bond, especially when it came to Maeve.

But when I glanced at Maeve, I saw the confusion in her eyes as she looked at Troy, her mouth slightly agape.

"I know it's a weird name—"

"Where do you know the name Soren from?" I asked hurried

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Troy's face underwent an incredible transformation as he turned to me. He was startled at first, but then his eyes narrowed on mine, looking at me as though for the first time.

"Are you related to a Soren? The man I knew he-he looks similar to you, I guess. I think—" Troy looked from me to Maeve, nearly snapping his neck.

"Wait a minute,"

"I have a half-brother named Soren," I said, trying not to raise my voice around the sleeping infants. "How could you possibly know him?"

"Maybe it's not the same Soren, Dad. Surely... surely there's more than one—" Maeve stuttered, adjusting William against her chest.

"I've only met the one," Troy said, shrugging.

I inhaled deeply. "What did he look like, exactly?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

Troy went on to describe my brother to a T, and the floor beneath me felt a little wobbly as I stood up and placed Charlie in Rosalie's arms.

"How the hell do you know him?" I asked bluntly, the words harsh and demanding.

Troy looked taken aback by my tone, and his cheeks colored as he shifted the unnamed baby, Little One, in his arms.

"He helped us build the Persephone."

“He WHAT?” Maeve was shocked, and her exclamation startled William, who screwed his tiny face into a bright red scowl and screeched with all his might. She placed him on her shoulder, patting him on the bottom with vigor as she glared at Troy. “Why didn’t you tell me this?”

“I had no idea you were related to him. I haven’t seen him since I was fifteen!”

“Fifteen?” I asked, scratching my beard. “That would have been ten years ago, just about?”

Troy nodded, trying to calm Little One, who was following his brother’s lead and beginning to fuss. “He crashed his cruiser into the reef that hugs the shore of Suntra. Keaton, Robbie, and I had a house there. Well, not really a house but something with walls and roof to keep up dry from the rain. We had to go rescue him before he got carried out by the tide. We helped him fix his cruiser, but he just... didn’t leave. He stayed with us for a year.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. I was stunned into utter disbelief. I had a hard time believing Soren wouldn’t have recognized Troy for who he was immediately, for one. Troy looked like Maddalyn, a damn near spitting image of her. And Behar’s blood ran through his veins.

I could see Behar in some of the expressions Troy made, especially when he narrowed his eyes. Soren’s sporadic letters over the past decade had no mention of Troy, or even Soren’s time in the isles. I knew Soren was off on some misadventure, but that was it.

“Does this mean we’re not naming him Soren?” Troy said, looking around at us.

Maeve turned red in a way I knew all too well. I could see the irrational anger beginning to flame behind her eyes. She felt along the side table, still nursing William, and knocked a granola bar to the ground by accident, which sent her over the edge.

“Why didn’t you tell me you knew Soren?!” she snapped, causing William to startle once again.

I took two huge steps and took William from her arms, bent to fetch the granola bar off the ground, opened it, and damn near stuffed it into her mouth for her. She lost some of her coloring, her shoulders slumping.

“I’m sorry. I’m tired.”

“Maybe we can table this... discussion until another time -” Rosalie stood, bouncing Charlie in her arms before setting him down in one of the three bassinets along the far wall. “I’ll go fetch a nurse-”

“I don’t want to talk about Soren,” Maeve said, her voice edged with sadness.

“Troy and I can talk about it without —” | began, moving to place William in the second bassinet.

“I want to talk about what happened.”

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The room quieted at her words. Troy swallowed, looking

down at Little One with a forlorn expression. How close we came to losing him...

“Maeve, honey. We have all the time in the world to talk about what happened,” Rosalie pleaded.

“What happens now? We brought the stones together. You got your powers back. I can feel... I can feel the mate bond, Mom. I feel it. What happens now? Are we safe? Are the babies... what if Tasia knows we’re here? I want to go back to Winter Forest,”

Troy moved quickly, rising from his seat and placing the tiny baby in her arms. Little One’s weight calmed her immediately, his jerky, uncoordinated movements distracting her as he tried to free himself from the swaddle.

“We’re okay, Maeve. Look at how far we’ve come,” Troy sat on the edge of the bed, leaning over her as he whispered against her cheek.

Rosalie moved to my side, taking my hand. “We should go. We have a lot to talk about too. They need to rest.”

“His name is Oliver,” Maeve said suddenly, just as Rosalie and I reached the doorway. We turned to her and watched as she adjusted the baby’s swaddling. “For Cleo. For Cleo’s mate.”

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 312

Chapter 92 : Unexpected Visitor

Maeve

I didn't even feel the long, horizontal wound below my navel. The doctors and nurses who had tended to me were shocked as they removed the sutures that should have been in for two weeks but were taken out after only three days.

There had been a discussion about discharging me, but I wouldn't hear it. I wasn't going to leave the hospital without Oliver.

He was the smallest of the boys by far. There was practically no fat on his body. But despite his size and the fact that he and his brothers had been born a month early, he was doing exceedingly well.

He was spirited and awake, his eyes constantly open, and his limbs always squirming. He was ready to take on the world, thought, as I ran my fingers over his bald head.

Charlie and Will were our big boys, chubby and happy with thick heads of fine, red hair. Charlie was the quiet one out of the three, and Will was the grumpy one. I was looking forward to seeing how these newborn personalities took shape as they got older.

And they would get older. All three of them. And I would be there to witness it.

After only five days of hospital surveillance, Oliver was allowed to go home with us. Home, it turned out, was the castle since we had crash-landed the seaplane.

It would take another two weeks to repair it, which seemed like a miracle given the damage, and Dad was adamant that we

not "risk our lives" by flying in a single-prop airplane back to Winter Forest in the middle of winter.

The castle felt like an unfamiliar place to me despite how much time I had spent there. Mom had me up and walking every few hours, my hand placed in the crook of her elbow as we walked from one end of the castle to the other, over and over

again.

We talked about every manner of things. My childhood and her childhood. My journey through the pass. Our shared friends and family members back in Winter Forest. Not once did we mention the moonstones or Mom's power. Not once did I speak on the fact that I could feel Troy was truly my mate. Not once was Tasia's name spoken aloud.

Troy and Dad had used the time we were spending at the castle to talk about what they should do about Poldesse, and I noticed a great shift in their relationship as the days went by. I had no memory of what had happened, not the plane crash or the stones or even the birth of our children.

But during that time, Troy had proven to my dad that he was the man I already knew him to be. He was capable of anything. And he was capable of saying no to Dad, if necessary, which was why I was shocked when he accepted Dad's proposal that Troy become the Alpha of Poldesse.

"But I thought that wasn't what you wanted? Carrying on Romero's legacy, or whatever." I was struggling to get Will's arm into a pair of bright green footed pajamas. He squawked, which caused Charlie to stir.

All three boys were currently in our bed in various states of undress. Troy had just finished changing Oliver's diaper, stepping back to admire his work. Oliver tucked his knees into his belly and his face turned a pale purple, and his diaper filled once again.

"Why do you do this?" Troy asked playfully, unclasping what had just been a fresh diaper.

Charlie continued to happily doze, likely having sweet, milky dreams while his brothers caused a ruckus. I looked down at Will, who was looking back up at me with his darkened irises. I could just see a hint of blue in them now as they lightened, pale blue, like my own.

Charlie had the same coloring, but Oliver's eye color was still a mystery. He had grown substantially in the last week since we'd been out of the hospital, and his head was now covered in pale copper peach fuzz. Charlie and Will's hair had darkened, which made me wonder if they'd have more of Troy's coloring as they got older.

"It's my birthright, Maeve, and I have an opportunity to change things in the Isles. It was my home, I guess, at least home base. I don't want another generation of kids growing up pack less. Something's gotta be done."

"But... I'll be White Queen one day. What happens then?"

"One of the boys will take over as Alpha, and we'll return to Winter Forest with you for my retirement. I'll just fish all day and read books out on the bluff. The grandkids can visit every summer."

I couldn't stop myself from smiling, despite my doubts.

"What if I become White Queen before... before they're grown?" I asked, unable to stop my mind from wandering to the moonstones and Tasia.

Troy sighed as he zipped up Oliver's pajamas. "We don't know where Tasia is. We don't know what she's planning. It sounds like she has one ally, and that's that Carl fellow from

Lycenna and none of us, including your Dad and Rowan, have ever met.

"Plus, your mom and Hanna got royally f*cked," he paused, blushing as he looked down at Oliver, "MESSED up, by Tasia," he corrected, clearing his throat. "She couldn't have come out of whatever happened between them unscathed."

"None of this makes sense to me, Troy. Does it make sense to you? Una and Tasia said combining the moonstones would bring the Moon Goddess back, and that whoever held them would have considerable power.

"We brought the stones together, and I still almost died. Mom has her powers, but she's still weak. And... and the vision I had in the stones, of the two white wolves... I don't understand what I'm supposed to do!"

"Maybe we don't have to do anything. Maybe we just focus on your recovery, and our sons, and starting a new life, together, far from Valoria."

"Then what of the prophecy that crazy old woman was talking about?" I scooped Will off the bed and patted his back, bouncing him on my shoulder. "It sounds like war is coming, and we're right in the middle of it."

Troy considered this, then shrugged, seeming generally uninterested in the topic altogether. “Maybe your mom’s immortal now, and we won’t have to worry about what we’re going to do in the event you become White Queen.”

“Immortal?” | laughed, which startled Will. He flinched in my arms and screwed his face into a grimace. “Oh, darling, I was kidding!” | patted him vigorously and he settled back down, keeping a careful eye on me. I had a feeling Will was going to be a force to be reckoned with in the future.

“Plus, it sounds like the prophecy is more related to Rowan and Hanna than to us.”

I bristled, suddenly feeling a little headed. “Didn’t you tell me once that Romero called me the... the key?”

Troy was playing with Oliver, moving his legs as if Oliver were riding a bike. “He did. I didn’t understand his meaning,”

“Rowan said Hanna always talked about needing to find the door to her dreams, to get out of them. She told Dad Rowan became the door, all she had to do was think of him... and me, I’m the key? But what am I the key to, exactly?”

“Well, you found the moonstones.”

“I didn’t find a single moonstone, Troy. Gemma had one, Soren gave Mom the other before anyone knew its meaning, and you found the one hidden in the tomb.”

“So? You were the reason for the quest, Maeve. Had you not been sent to Valoria, who knows if Damian would’ve acted in the way he did. You set things in motion. Maybe that’s why you’re the key.

“You ... unlocked the prophecy, and now Rowan finishes it. That’s how I interpret it. It sounds like whatever child he has with Hanna is possibly the child Una was talking about, the twenty first wolf, or whatever,”

“Twenty-first White Queen, Troy, which would mean my title would go to their daughter, not one of our own.”

“Well... do you want more kids?” He motioned toward our bed, which was covered in babies.

I laughed, shaking my head. "I never want to be pregnant again, thank you very much. I feel like there was a war inside my body."

"Good, because I never-" Troy flushed, his cheeks burning with heat. "I can't lose you, Maeve. I came very close. I don't want to do that again."

"I'm done if you're done." I swallowed against the odd tightening in the chest as I said the words. I was supposed to have a daughter to carry on the White Queen line, but Mom and Dad had had two children... me and Rowan. Rowan had Mom's blood. He could carry on the White Queen line.

That was, if Hanna stayed with him, and accepted her destiny.

There was a sharp knock on the door, and a maid stepped in. She was new, unfamiliar, but pleasant and soft-spoken.

"Princess Maeve," she said with a curtsy. "Um, Troy."

"Is everything alright?" I asked as I turned to her.

Her cheeks were pinkened from the effort of what looked like her mad dash to our bedroom, which was my old room in the castle.

"Your father... the Alpha King... is fighting with a man downstairs who has been asking for the two of you."

"Fighting?" Troy asked, letting go of Oliver's legs.

The maid nodded with vigor, looking a little pale. She didn't need to describe what was happening downstairs. Now that the door was open, I could hear Dad's raised voice wafting up the stairwell down the hallway from us.

"I will watch the babies!" the maid exclaimed as Dad yelled something quite colorful.

Troy gave me a suspicious look, then nodded at the maid.

"We'll send the nanny up for you. Maeve needs to rest soon anyway. Maeve, let's see what this is about."

I followed Troy out of the bedroom and into the hallway, Dad's voice getting louder as we walked down the many flights of stairs to the grand foyer. I could see Mom standing with her arms crossed, her hair pulled back into a long braid as she watched Dad berate whoever had come calling.

Troy paused at the bottom of the stairs, then ran forward, leaving me behind.

Keaton was standing in the center of the foyer, two warriors holding him back while he went back and forth with Dad, his beautiful face twisted in a sneer.

"Keaton!" I cried, running toward him.

Dad immediately quieted, shocked by the joy in my voice as Troy and I nearly tackled Keaton to the ground.

"Get off! This is a new coat. It's velvet—" Keaton choked out, pushing us both away.

"Where's Myla? And Cleo?" I said excitedly.

"Shopping." Keaton said, matter-of-factly. "But we all heard you were here, the both of you. We wanted to visit —" Keaton glanced at Dad, glaring. "But your father isn't the most welcoming host."

My eyes went wide as I turned to Dad. He had asked about Keaton, of course, and the entire crew of the Persephone. I knew he blamed Keaton for the fact I was missing for so long when in

reality it was more Troy's fault than anything.

"Get that pirate out of my castle," Dad said calmly, his hands on his hips.

"Another time, then?" Keaton bowed dramatically, mocking Dad's position.

"You're going to get yourself killed, you idiot," Troy whispered before putting an arm around him, leading him toward the door. "Let's go sit in the garden."

"Maeve needs to come too. And her parents," Keaton said, stopping before they could cross the threshold. He looked over his shoulder at Dad. "We need to talk about Dianny."

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 313

Chapter 93 : The Beta of Poldesse

Maeve

The gardens at the castle were very much changed with the season. Winter had yellowed and dried the leaves to a chilled crisp, and the garden was littered with foliage debris. It was cold, but not like the bitter, dry cold of Winter Forest. Here, the air still seemed thick with moisture, and the gray sky seemed more apt to rain than snow.

I wondered about the boys as I followed Troy, Keaton, and my dad into the sanctuary of the lower garden. The nanny Geor gia and Talon had hired to help care for Ernest when he was young had come out of retirement to help with the three new in fans at the castle. She was a seasoned professional, and Mom had chosen to stay behind to help, but I was still weary, especially since whatever conversation was about to take place would likely take a while.

Troy stepped into the gazebo, motioning for Keaton to sit down. Keaton was eyeing Dad suspiciously, but sat down nonetheless, crossing his arms over his chest as he settled back against a wrought iron chair.

Dad was well aware of our time spent in Dianny. Mom had been briefed as well, but I doubted either of them fully understood the shock Keaton, Troy, and I felt at the news that Tasia may have destroyed the ancient pack.

“Robbie’s alive,” Keaton said with soberness in his voice. “So is his mate, Alison. They made it out before shit really hit the fan.”

“What exactly happened?” Troy took a seat across from Keaton, but Dad had chosen to stand, leaning against one of the

stone columns that supported the roof of the gazebo. I leaned as well, enjoying a moment of physical activity after spending most of the last week in bed, covered in babies.

“Tasia she... well, I guess I should start by saying Una is dead, as is her husband, and most if not all of Tasia’s siblings.”

“What?” | could barely believe it. Tasia was the eldest of her siblings, and she couldn’t have been much older than myself.

Keaton nodded, his eyes wide as he stared down at his shoes. He shivered, then shook his head, looking into Troy's eyes. "It was mayhem from what Robbie said. Tasia declared herself Alpha, but the pack revolted against her. That's when Robbie and Alison left with those who didn't want to fight, or couldn't. Mostly families. We brought them all to the isles... so many children. Orphans, now. Tasia brought the whole damn valley in on itself. There's nothing left but stone."

"She... what? What do you mean she brought down the valley?" I asked, trying to make sense of what he was saying.

"Robbie said they had just arrived at the shore when what felt like an earthquake rocked the jungle. They camped on the shore for a week before we arrived and rescued them. I sent... I sent a few scouts back to Dianny. There's nothing left. It's buried under hundreds of feet of stone. The village. The lake. It's gone."

"Oh, my Goddess," I whispered, wrapping my arms around the column for support. I looked up at Dad, who was listening to Keaton with a blank expression.

"And Robbie is here, in Mirage?" Troy asked. Keaton nodded, then shrugged.

"Aye, he is. The women wanted to gather some supplies before we left the port again—clothes and toys for the children back

on Suntra. That's where they're all staying now, you see, at our old compound. They're all that's left of The Daughters of Artemis now."

"I'd like to talk to him, get his word about the disaster," Dad stepped forward, tucking his hands in his pockets. "What's his full name? I assume everyone is staying at the inn in Old Town?"

"Robert Arlo," Troy answered, nodding his head in agreement. "We do need to speak to him, Keat. We need to know what we're dealing with here."

Keaton crossed his ankles, leaning back in his chair. "We're dealing with a power-hungry mad woman. What more is there to say?"

To my surprise, it was Dad who replied, telling Keaton in detail what had happened in Winter Forest. Keaton listened in shock, especially when Dad began to explain how we combined the moonstones.

“Well, we’re all going to die,” Keaton deadpanned.

Dad stared at him, his brow arched. But Troy chuckled, crossing his leg over his knee as he leaned back in his own chair.

“And it sounds like Maeve almost died already, anyway,” Keaton added.

“Oh, I did die,” I said lightly. Troy stopped chuckling, his face falling in sudden remembrance. “Too soon?”

“Leave the poor man alone, Maeve,” Dad said sternly, stepping forward into the center of the circle. “You go by Captain Keaton formally, correct?”

Keaton straightened up a little bit, glancing at Troy with a smug touching his lips. “Aye, I do.”

“Well, Captain. You need to stay in Mirage for another two days, until the conference on Friday.”

“What conference?” I asked, thoroughly in the dark. I thought we were leaving for Winter Forest on Friday and wasn’t aware that our plans had changed.

“The conference of our allies, to announce-” Dad said, but Troy jumped to his feet, interrupting.

“I need to talk to Keaton for a moment, alone,” he said quickly, nodding shortly at Dad.

Dad glanced at Keaton, then nodded, turning to me with his arm outstretched to lead me back into the castle.

Troy

I walked with Keaton out of the gardens, moving in silence as we reached the edge of the castle grounds and what was left of Old Town. In the nine months since Damian had invaded, much had been done to repair and rebuild the damage to the old village, but there was still a long way to go. The main street where the market used to be was nearly empty, not a single canvas – Cov

ered stall to be seen.

“Are we going to the inn to get Robbie?” Keaton asked, kicking at a stick on the ground.

I nodded, chewing on the inside of my lower lip as I tried to muster the courage to say what I needed to say.

“Look, Keat. I’m going to be... to be Alpha of Poldesse. That’s partly what this conference is about. The Alpha’s of the East and

West are coming together to discuss what’s to be done about Tasia, and Ethan will be announcing my title. I wanted you to hear it from me first.”

“I feel like we already had this conversation,” Keaton grumbled.

“Kind of, I guess. It was more about Ethan possibly killing me the second I stepped foot in Winter Forest, which you were obviously wrong about.”

“You’re really accepting the title?” he asked dubiously.

“Yeah, I am. Maeve was meant to be a Luna. She was born for it.”

“And what happens when her mother dies, and she has to be the White Queen? You split up?”

“No... I doubt we’ll have to worry about that for a long time. The boys will be grown by the time we need to even think about it, I hope.”

“And what of the boys? I still can’t believe you had three.”

“Me neither, honestly. Every day is a blur.” I couldn’t help but laugh. I wanted to go back to the castle as soon as I fetched Robbie, Myla, and Cleo. I wanted nothing more than to witness Maeve’s reunion with them, and to see them gush over our sons.

“But now you have three sons to fight over the title of Alpha of Poldesse, Troy. Is that what you really want for them?”

“Of course not,” I tucked my chilled fingers in my pockets, looking straight ahead as we began to near the inn near the train station. “But what choice do I have? This is my birthright, and I believe Ethan is correct in the Isles needing an Alpha. It’s been

over two decades since the people of the Isles have had a real pack to be a part of. Damian's rule was... not what it should have been."

"And what of those who don't agree?" Keaton rounded on me, crossing his arms over his chest.

"I won't force anyone to pledge their loyalty. I won't be collecting tribute. I'll just be there; that's what's important. And Keaton, look, I need you there too."

"Where?"

I drew in my breath, unsure if I wanted to hear his answer. "I want you to live in Avondale, with us. As my Beta."

"No," Keaton replied without hesitation as he began walking again.

I exhaled, rolling my eyes as I caught up to him. "Why the hell not?"

"Because I've never had a master, and I don't plan on changing that."

"Master? What the hell are you talking about?"

Keaton rounded on me once more, his eyes narrowed as he leaned forward. "You'd be my boss, Troy. I think the hell not!"

"Oh, come on, Keaton! You know it's not like that."

"And what will the other Alphas think about having a known pirate and smuggler as the Beta of Poldesse? Hmm? And your father-in-law? That man wanted nothing more than to rip me to shreds in the foyer of that castle you're all living in—"

s "Be my Beta!"

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"Be my Beta!"

"NO!" Keaton walked away, his shoulders tight and arms at his side.

"Keaton, for Goddess's sake, listen to me—" | grunted with effort as I caught up to him, grabbing him by the shoulder and forcing him to face me. "Look at me, Look—"

"I told you before we parted ways that this is against everything we promised each other when we were young. I won't. I refuse." Keaton shrugged off my hand.

"What will you do, then? Live on the Persephone for the rest of your life? And what of Myla? Is that what she wants as well, or would she prefer a home on land for your future family? Keaton, I'm not asking you to go around the Isles

depending people's lives. That's not my plan. I just want some peace for Maeve and me. I have the opportunity to build something for my children, okay? || want you to have the same."

"Don't speak for Myla. She has already promised to go wherever I go."

"Yeah, so did Maeve. And she always will. So will Myla. But it's our responsibility as their mates to take care of them, Keaton. Provide for them."

"I don't need your money-"

"I know. That's not what I'm saying."

"No, Troy. I won't. Don't ask me again." Keaton was dead serious, and I felt my heart crack as I saw the hurt behind his eyes. This was a betrayal to him.

"I'm not Damian. Or Romero-"

"But you're an Alpha. I'm a pirate, Troy. This isn't going to

work." Keaton turned away and walked briskly to the inn, throwing up the door and letting it slam shut before I could reach it.

"Bastard," I mumbled under my breath, stepping inside the run-down lobby and watching as Keaton hopped up the stairs two steps at a time. "I'll just wait here, I guess-"

I was alone in the lobby for barely a minute before Myla's voice rang out through the hallway above my head. She nearly fell down the entire staircase as she bounded down the stairs, throwing her arms around me and squeezing me tightly. Cleo was close behind, and so was Robbie, who had a huge grin on his face as he clapped me on the shoulder in hello.

"How is Maeve? Where is she? Has she had the twins yet? They should be due any day!" Cleo was gripping my jacket, concern lining her face.

"She's great. They're great. All three are boys," I answered, smiling as she looked up at me in shock.

"Triplets?" Myla gasped.

"The Alpha King is expecting us at the castle, Robbie. Let's go," Keaton said shortly, pushing past us as he headed out the door.

We watched him walk away, not bothering to try to keep up with him.

“What’d you do to him, Troy?” Robbie asked as we reached the street.

I shook my head, watching the sunset through the trees.

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 314

Chapter 94 : 1 Kissed Her

Rowan

“It wasn’t easy,” said the metalsmith as he wiped his grimy hands on a rag. He spun around in his car, plopping a small, smooth ring in the palm of my hand. “You were right about the stone; it was jade—a sizable, practically flawless hunk of it. Say, where did you find it?”

“On the beach,” I said softly, turning the ring over in my hand.

The entire thing was made of jade, carved right out of the stone Hanna had found on our walk on the beach several weeks before the snow had begun to fall. That was months ago, I thought, wrapping my fingers around the ring. Things had somehow felt easier then.

“There’s enough of the mother-stone left for a second ring, at least partially. Half would need to be metal of some kind, I recommend platinum. It’s what I used to give the first ring support, you see.”

“It’s... it’s fine. It’s just a gift.”

IL11

A parting gift.

Something I had planned on giving to Hanna under very different circumstances. I had carried that damn rock around in my jacket since the day she found it, marveling at the pale sea – green band of jade running through it whenever I had a moment of solitude to fish it out of its resting place.

I had imagined making a ring with it, one of pure jade, thinking the color would look perfect against the paleness of her skin. I

had imagined slipping it onto her finger and taking her hand in mine, as my wife.

I swallowed back the pain and paid the metalsmith, thanking him for his time. The ring felt heavy in my hand as I walked through the center of the village, crossing the road leading up to my house and through the woods toward Hanna's cabin.

It had been a week since Maeve and my parents left for Mi rage. Two days ago, a pilot from Mirage had arrived in a Cessna 210, large enough to fit six passengers. He had come bearing news of Maeve, but we didn't have much time to grieve her experience. She was fine, as were my three nephews, but the large seaplane that had been carting my family back and forth to Mi rage for decades had crash-landed and needed repairs.

We had all been summoned to Mirage. And I knew in my absence, Hanna would likely go back to Red Lakes as planned.

I wanted to ask her to come with me. I was ready to beg. But I knew it would be fruitless.

Any future I had with her seemed to evaporate the second she told Maeve and me what she had seen in her vision of Maeve's future. Maeve and Troy had been discussing what sounded like a succession of sorts, facilitated by my dad. My interpretation of the dream was that one of their sons was ascending a throne, which couldn't have been Troy's soon-to-be – title of Alpha of Poldesse. That left only two options: Alpha King of Valoria, or Alpha of Drogomor.

Which were the titles I was meant to inherit.

Which could only mean that I would have no children to pass them on to.

1 The only shred of hope I had was that Hanna had been Wrong about only two of the triplets surviving. The entire vision

could've been wrong, but what did it matter? Hanna was leaving. There was nothing I could do about it.

And I couldn't carry the hunk of jade in my pocket any longer.

I barely noticed how far I had walked, lost in thought, until I was standing at the bottom of the steps leading into her cabin.

She must have heard me coming because no sooner had I put my foot on the first step did she open the door, her black hair hanging loose over her shoulder and a plush bathrobe covering her flannel pajamas.

It was late afternoon, the sky an inky purple dappled with stars. I needed to be at the seldom used and grossly neglected landing strip outside of the village in the next hour.

This was it. This was goodbye.

"I meant to shovel the stairs for you again, but I—" I started, motioning toward the three or so inches of fresh snow blanketing the stairs.

Hanna leaned on the doorway, her eyes shining in the porch light. "It's okay, Rowan. Pete can do it. You've... it's been a rough week."

"Yeah, it has been." The ring was burning a hole through the palm of my hand. I wanted nothing more than to toss it to her without a word and run then try to continue to stifle the heavy, overwhelming heartbreak. I understood her reasonings for wanting no, needing to leave. But I would never understand why she felt like I wasn't strong enough to protect her, and my family, from whatever was coming.

"Kacidra said you're leaving soon."

"I am. Now, actually. I have to... I wanted to give you some

thing before I went. In case you weren't... weren't here when I returned." I climbed a single step, unsure if my feet would let me go any further. The truth was, I likely wouldn't be returning to Winter Forest for a long time. Dad had called a major conference in Mirage, and all of the Alphas would be required to attend.

I would be made Alpha of Drogomor, officially. And I would set up residency in the castle immediately.

I looked up at Hanna, holding out my hand. I placed the ring in her open palm, wrapping my hand around hers.

“I had it made from the piece of Jade you found on the beach. I thought... I want you to have it, despite everything. I couldn't leave without knowing you had it. I don't expect you to wear it. I don't expect... I don't expect anything. I respect you, Hanna. I respect you as much as I love you... and Goddess, I love you. I just needed you to know that.”

I took my hand from hers, looking into her eyes for a split second before I turned and walked away, letting the dark of our early nights wrap itself around me.

Ernest lifted George into the snug cabin of my Cessna 180, which looked like a toy compared to the glossy two-prop Cessna 210 that was idling only ten yards away on the ice-covered river. He handed George to Gemma, who immediately started fussing over the white snowsuit George was wearing, which made him look like a marshmallow.

His black curls were sticking out of the bright purple wool hat Gretchen had knit for him, and he was staring forward at the dashboard of the plane, mesmerized by the lit-up switches and gauges.

“Do you have his blanket?” Gemma asked, her voice distorted by the sound of the engine.

Ernest handed her the fluffy blanket in question, then stepped into the plane to drape a heavy wool blanket over his mate and their child, tucking the blanket around Gemma's hips.

“Here,” I said, reaching back to hand Ernest a headset, which he put over Gemma's hat, securing the headset over Gemma's ears. I reached down to the controls and switched on her mic.

Ernest tucked a duffle bag next to Gemma, then grabbed the front passenger seat, which had been folded forward to allow Gemma to climb into her seat, and put it back into position. He climbed in next to me, closing the door and buckling his seatbelt.

“Do you know how to fly this thing?” he joked with a wide smile, securing his own headset over his ears.

I reluctantly switched on his mic, and his laugh boomed in my headset.

“No barrel rolls, Rowan,” Gemma said sternly, looking a little pale as she sat behind us with George in her lap.

“Not until Georgie is six months old,” I laughed, which elicited a steely glare from Gemma. “We’re just waiting on the other plane to taxi. Shouldn’t be long.”

Talon had taught me how to fly. He was a shitty pilot, however, and Mom and Dad had allowed me to take actual lessons from someone in Winter Forest when I turned eighteen. I turned my gaze to the other plane, watching as Georgia and Vicky settled all three of my young cousins into their seats.

Talon was, of course, sitting in the co-pilot seat. If the pilot was smart, he would cut Talon’s mic. Otherwise, Talon would be

directing him on how to fly the plane for the entire flight.

I smiled a bit at the thought then turned back to the dash board of my own tiny vessel. It had only two rows of seats, big enough to carry four adults at the most. It also didn’t have heat, so we were all bundled up in parkas and heavy gloves. George seemed fine with the arrangement, and within minutes, the heavy vibration in the cabin had lulled him into a deep sleep.

“How long is the flight in this thing?” Gemma’s voice cut through my headset, and I turned to look at her, adjusting my mic over my mouth.

“Roughly four hours, but we’re going with the wind, not against it. We’re landing on the strip near the castle so that cuts our trip short.” And that was the truth. The seaplane could fit our entire family in comfort but needed to be landed at the port or the lake, which were both far from Mirage. Small Cessnas could land on the practically forgotten airstrips with relative ease, but it was a less comfortable ride.

“I’ll never forgive you if you crash!” Gemma glared forward and swallowed hard, obviously nervous.

“I promise I will try to land this hunk of rust in one piece, by at least the second attempt!”

“Rowan! Stop messing with me!”

Ernest was laughing despite his mate's turmoil. I reached down and shut off her mic to thwart any further attacks on my piloting abilities.

"How come you didn't just take this thing down to Mirage when you stopped hearing from me and Maeve?" Ernest asked, resting his head against the headrest.

I pursed my lips, tapping my fingers on the yoke, which is what was used to steer the plane.

"The water on the inlet is too rough for a plane of the size. I can't fight the tide with it. It's better to take off on the ice, with wheels instead of floats. I'd love to take this thing out in the summer, but Dad thinks I'm going to die in this one day, so he refuses to build an actual airstrip."

"Well, you're about to become Alpha of Drogomor. You can build as many airstrips in Mirage as you like."

I smiled to myself, thankful things between Ernest and I weren't at all awkward, even though I was taking the title he had recently given up.

Ernest and I hadn't ever gotten along very well. He was closer to Maeve's age, and we hadn't had much in common as kids. But he was very much changed now, I realized. Gemma had gotten to him, smoothing his rough edges.

We also now had Troy in common, who seemed to be pulling everyone together lately, his friendship almost as magnetic as his personality, despite the fact that he had kidnapped my sister.

"Well, I gotta build those radio towers first."

I wasn't sure if he'd heard me. He had turned to Gemma, holding his headset off one ear as she complained about the fact Thad turned off her mic.

This was going to be a long flight.

The pilot of the other plane came over my headset, telling me he was about to taxi out. There were several warriors on the ice holding flashlights to help guide us along. I watched them spread

out, moving out of the way as the larger plane powered forward.

I caught movement out of my peripheral and turned my head just as the first plane took off. I had my hand on the yoke, seconds away from taking off.

Hanna. She was talking to a warrior, pointing to my plane.

The jade ring was on her finger.

I opened the door of the plane, fighting against my seatbelt and cursing audibly as I fumbled with the clasp. Ernest reached over and freed me, giving me a look and nodding, a whisper of a smile touching his lips.

slipped on the ice, twice, as I made my way to Hanna. I was breathless and ruffled when I finally closed the distance between us. I stopped short of her, apprehension sweeping over me. Why was she here, if not for me?

“Is there room for one more in that tiny plane?” she asked, her mouth widening into a brilliant smile

Then I kissed her.

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 315

Maeve

Cleo and Myla were sitting in awe in front of the hearth in the library, looking down at infants in their hands. Alison, Robbie’s mate, was holding Will, who was surprisingly well behaved as he peered up at the perfect stranger in whose

arms he rested.

“I don’t know how I missed him,” Cleo whispered, looking down at Oliver with a soft frown creasing her brow. “I’ve never... Oh, Maeve, I am so sorry!”

“Cleo, none of this is your fault. None of it. We’re all fine

now, that’s what matters!” | sat between her and Myla and on the couch, holding a mug of hot cider between my hands as | glanced from baby to baby, a wave of relief washing over me. We had all finally been reunited after Troy and I had separated from the Persephone.

ooh “This one looks so much like Troy.” Myla ran her knuckle

over Charlie's cheek, which caused him to smile in reflex.

Myla beamed, tears glimmering in her eyes.

"Both Will and Charlie look shockingly like Troy, but I think Oliver looks like me." I sipped my cider again and caught Cleo's surprised gaze. She looked down at little Oli, whose name I hadn't uttered until that moment. Myla rested her hand against my thigh, then leaned her head on my shoulder.

"Thank you, Maeve," she whispered, just as Cleo dissolved into tears.

I wondered if Cleo had ever told Myla the truth about Olivia, who had been Cleo's mate and Myla's mother. Based on their ease with each other, and the teary, knowing glance they shared, I assumed that they had. Cleo didn't bother to wipe the tears away as they fell, she kept her gaze firmly on Oli, Olivia's namesake.

"What a blessing," Cleo grinned, her voice distorted by a sob.

Alison, who was pregnant herself, seemed slightly overwhelmed as Myla and Cleo prodded me for details about the birth of the boys.

"I worry about myself," Alison said, swallowing hard.

"Why is that? You're strong and healthy, and only carry one child-" Cleo retorted, but Alison paled.

"I carry Robbie's child, Cleo. He is seven feet tall. I am sure he was a giant infant at his birth."

My eyes widened as I took Alison in. She was very petite,

hardly five feet tall herself, maybe shorter. Seeing her standing next to Robbie was shocking.

Robbie, Dad, Troy, Rowan, and Ernest were all in Ernest's old office, talking about Dianny. Gemma had just entered the

library, George balanced on her hip while she walked behind

a maid pushing a tea cart stacked with all kinds of lunch foods.

Good, I thought. I was absolutely starving,

“I was just in the kitchen and saw your mom, Maeve. She

said there’s a conference of Alphas meeting in town tomorrow. And a gala the next day?” Gemma and the rest of the family from Winter Forest had arrived late the night before, and we had spent the majority of the early morning explaining what had happened when Troy and I left for Mirage with

my parents.

I opened my mouth to reply to Gemma, but Myla

screamed.

Myla’s scream, as well as the screeches of all four babies,

George included, erupted through the library and echoed off

the walls.

In all of the chaos of not only my family, but my friends from the Persephone, arriving at nearly the same time, I had totally forgotten to mention one major piece of information to Myla.

That Gemma, who she had loved as much as I had, was in

fact, alive.

“Oh, Goddess! Myla I am so sorry -” | leaped from the couch and took Charlie from her arms before she dropped him in her haste to rise from the couch. Cleo had risen, equally as pale but much more reserved in her reaction to Gemma’s

s sudden and unexpected appearance.

We had mourned her death together.

And now she was standing in front of us, healthy, robust, holding her cherubic son proudly in her arms.

nma was

Gemma was absolutely blubbering by the time Myla reached her and threw her arms around her. Alison looked shocked, totally oblivious to what was happening.

| smiled as I patted Charlie against my shoulder, blinking away my tears of utter, indescribable joy.

“What a fruitful season,” Alison said as she bounced George on her knee. George was rather particular about only wanting his mother, but Alison had been successful at keep

ing him entertained while Gemma ate with vigor, lost in quite yet animated conversation with Myla and Cleo at the long ta

ble on the other end of the library.

A thick blanket in front of the hearth had become a sleeping mat for Will and Oli, who were happily snoozing in the radiating warmth of the wide fireplace. Alison reached up to run her fingers through George’s hair, who cooed happily, his mouth stretching into a gummy, delirious smile.

Charlie was asleep on my lap, his round cheeks soft and rosy.

“It has been fruitful,” I replied with a soft smile.

“My mother would have... she would have loved to see this place.” Alison flushed with sudden sorrow.

“She is more than welcome to visit...” | tapered off, noticing the tears glistening in Alison’s eyes. “Oh, I’m sorry Alison, 1

“It’s alright. Truly. I did what I could for her.”

“What do you mean?” While Robbie had been in Dianny

when Tasia went berserk, Alison’s account was what I was most interested in. She had grown up in Dianny and would see Tasia’s attack in a different light.

It would have been a significant betrayal, and something that took everything she had ever known from her in a matter of hours.

“My mother wouldn’t leave with us. She just wouldn’t go. Nor would my two eldest sisters... and their children. I was able to convince my other sisters and their families to leave, but the men... their husbands, and my brothers, they....”

She swallowed against her grief. She didn’t need to elab

orate, and I told her as such. She was in great pain over the deaths of many, many of what sounded like a rather large im mediate family.

“Robbie carried the kids out in his arms,” she said with a soft, somber smile, her eyes glistening with warmth as she said his name. “Four each in his arms, if you can believe it.”

“I can,” I said with a little laugh, remembering the many

times I had been manhandled by Robbie at Keaton’s, and

sometimes Troy’s, orders.

“We were at the beach for just over a week. We didn’t know if Tasia was coming for us, or what we would find if we went back... Robbie was only one of four men who got out of... of the city before Tasia ... before she....”

Another wave of tears fell over Alison’s pale lashes, her cheeks pinkened with an embarrassed blush. “I am so sorry for my emotions,”

“Don’t be! We have all been through hell and back, Alison.

There is no shame in feeling sadness. I cry all the time,” I said honestly, but the words felt flat against my tongue. My family

was well and accounted for. Alison’s family was not.

She nodded, glancing up at me with a grateful smile touching her lips. George was reaching for her, his chubby fists opening and closing as she held him against her chest, rocking them together side to side.

Troy

The castle had erupted into activity over the past twenty-four hours. Parts of the castle I hadn't even seen before had been opened up, cleaned and decorated richly, and several large white tents had been erected in the garden.

Even the evening I had brought Robbie to meet with

Ethan had been married with a flurry of extraneous activity, seeing me whisked away for a fitting for several formal outfits instead of catching up with our friends. Then Rowan, Hanna, and the rest of the family from Winter Forest arrived, and all hell seemed to break loose. Maeve and I weren't getting much sleep already, and we had spent the majority of the night awake, passing around the babies and explaining what had happened.

Maeve was on edge as well as we stood on the stairs, watching through the window as servants set up several heaters in the garden, preparing for a large party.

"Why didn't he tell us about the conference? And the gala?" Maeve asked after several moments of silence.

I crossed my arms over my chest, not needing to ponder the answer. "Because he's going to announce me as the Alpha of Poldesse, that's why."

Maeve sighed deeply, shaking her head as she turned to face me.

"He should have told you-"

"He didn't want to give me an opportunity to change my mind, Maeve."

It wasn't going to be as easy as just announcing my title to the Alphas of both the east and west. I would be facing the High Elder Council, a group of people who had been chosen by the Alphas of the major cities across the pack lands to act as judges and mediators to prevent future conflicts after the war twenty-six years ago. Even with the Alpha King of Valoria's blessing and my birthright, I would still need to plead my

case to the council.

The Isles were dead center in a major trade route between the two continents, and I would be the one with control of it all.

“Well, you still have time to change your mind. You know I’ll support you.”

“It’s too late to change my mind, even if I wanted to.”

“If it makes you feel any better, Rowan will be getting grilled by the High Council as well. Plus, all of this will be overshadowed by the whole... Tasia issue.”

I nodded, gripping the railing. I wondered how Ethan was going to broach that subject to practically every Alpha in the pack lands.

Ethan had obviously had this planned for a while, possibly before Maeve’s pregnancy had forced us to go to Mirage.

“Why do I feel like we’re about to be thrown into the fire?”

Maeve pouted, reaching up to rub her eyes. It was late after

noon now, and she had spent most of the day in the company of Gemma and Myla, who wouldn’t, I was sure, have allowed her any rest.

“Thrown to the wolves, more like it,” I smirked, putting my arm over her shoulder. I led her back upstairs, thankful that the nanny had taken the boys for a few hours. “I think you should try to sleep for a while.”

“I can’t. We have dinner with the entire family soon,”

“I’ll have something sent up for you. They will understand.

They have to understand.”

But I wasn't sure if anyone, besides Rosalie and Ethan, would truly understand what we had been through the past

few weeks.

I tucked Maeve into bed, and she fell asleep immediately.

I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror in the hallway on my way down to the library, where the rest of the family had been congregating throughout the day.

I wondered, as I ran my fingers through my hair, who the other Alphas would see when they looked at me at the con

ference. Would they see an equal?

Or would they see me for who I was?

The son of traitors.

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 316

Troy

The University of Mirage had sustained major damage during the invasion. Scaffolding snaked up the outer walls of the university's event center, which was one of the oldest buildings in Valoria. The last timeli had been to the event center was the night I went to the social and eventually got attacked in a darkened alley and witnessed Maeve nearly kill a man.

Watching her knock the man's teeth out was the moment really, truly, fell in love with her.

The center looked different in the light of day, however. No paper lanterns hung along the high ceilings as I followed Ethan and Rowan up the wide, stone staircase. Daylight flooded through the massive stained glass window as we reached the top of the stairwell, little shreds of multicolored light dancing around our feet.

Men were walking past us, funneling into the lecture hall.

“All you have to do is answer their questions. The less you say, the better.” Ethan directed this toward me, and I nodded, willing myself to have a filter although I knew it was unlikely.

We followed Ethan into the lecture hall. I had expected him to stop and chat with his fellow Alphas, but he walked down the stairs and motioned to us to sit in a row of seats close to the platform where a group of six people was seated in a semi

circle, dressed in black robes.

I looked around the room as we sat down, trying to make sense of the number of Alphas in the room. There must have been some Betas included in the meeting; that was the only explanation.

After roughly ten minutes, the conference began. It was early in the morning, and the smell of coffee was thick in the air as the High Elder Council began to speak. They called out the name of each Alpha and his pack. The Alpha of Breles. The Alpha of Emerald Lake, of Tragoria, of Moon Haven, and so on, and so forth. Packs I had never even heard of had been called into attendance.

The six High Elders represented the territories of the pack lands, three from Finadli, the western continent, and three from Valoria, the eastern. I hadn't noticed the seventh elder until she spoke, her accent strange and unfamiliar as her words rang clear throughout the lecture hall.

“We are gathered to speak on many topics today, such as trade, infrastructure, and the exchange of titles,” she said calmly before taking a seat at the end of the semi-circle table.

“Who is she?” I asked Rowan. Rowan leaned towards me, whispering.

“She's the High Priestess of the Church of the Moon Goddess. The Church has its own representative on the council. That way, there is never a split vote.”

“Ah, I see,” I said, my mouth feeling a little numb.

Rowan seemed out of sorts as well, and we were both sweating with nerves as we listened to matters of trade being discussed, trying to follow along!

“We now call the Alpha King of Valoria to the podium,” an elder said, looking bored.

I wondered just how much Ethan was going to tell the other Alphas about the situation with Tasia. But to my surprise, he said nothing about it all.

Instead, he did something more shocking.

“Much has changed in the last twenty-five years. The growth of Valoria is now rivaled by the population boom in Finaldi. There was a time in which I would have argued against Finaldi needing an Alpha King reinstated to the throne,” he bellowed, not bothering to use the microphone. “I seek the council’s guidance on the matter of crowning a King of the West.”

Shocked murmuring echoed through the lecture hall. Rowan shifted in his seat, glancing over at me.

“What is he doing?” Rowan whispered.

“Playing... chess,” I breathed, leaning back in my own chair and crossing my legs, my ankle balanced on my opposite knee.

“There is no need for an Alpha king in the Finaldi. Their territories are too rural outside of Breles for that to make much of a difference,” said one of the elders, rolling a pen over his fingers.

“I believe the Alphas of the new territories north of Breles

would disagree with that sentiment.” Ethan had his arms crossed over his chest as he spoke, his brow arched as he looked out into the crowd. He locked his gaze, and I followed it, finding myself looking right at Aaron of Red Lakes, who was sitting next to a small man who must have been his father.

“Oh, shit...” I whispered as I sunk into my seat.

Aaron was staring right at me, his eyes narrowed.

“What?” Rowan whispered.

I tilted my head in Aaron’s direction.

“Oh, Aaron’s here? I thought this meeting was only for Alphas and their Betas,”

“Keaton and I straight up kidnapped that guy, Rowan,” hissed, trying to keep my voice as low as possible as Ethan continued to plead his case.

Rowan stole another glance at Aaron, but shrugged, turning back to whisper in my ear again in a joking manner. “He’s not a threat. We could beat him up after the meeting, if you want, just to show him who’s in control. Dad would probably allow it

We both turned, feeling Ethan’s steely glare on us. Rowan colored and slouched into his seat, the two of us resigned to silent attention.

“That’s why the Alpha of Breles and myself believe a new Alpha King of the West should be chosen,” Ethan continued, bringing his gaze back to the elders. “Alpha Tritan of Breles

has no heirs to carry on his line and doesn’t want the title. He believes it should go to a northern Alpha in the new western territories. I am in agreement. We are casting our support behind Alpha Eugene, of Red Lakes.”

A much louder murmur erupted behind us, and I turned to set my gaze on Alpha Eugene, Aaron’s father. He was a small man, an elder, but the obvious fire behind his eyes betrayed his age. He was looking around, accepting claps on the shoulder in congratulations and support. Aaron was shell shocked, his eyes staring blankly ahead as he internally grappled with what his father’s new title would mean for him in the future.

Alpha Eugene caught my eye, his green eyes lingering on mine for a moment before he gave me a tight smile, nodding his head in my direction before glancing at his son with a shrug.

Odd, I thought. Surely Aaron told him what happened. And Ethan would have explained the current situation, I was sure. Alpha Eugene seemed to not even care that he was sitting in the same room with the man who had kidnapped his son and taken his place as breeder. The same man who was about to become an Alpha.

“Alpha Eugene of Red Lakes?” someone in the crowd said with uncertainty.

“The new western territories are traitors to Findali!” another said.

Eugene bristled at this comment and rose from his seat. “The northern territories have paved the way for new trade routes and infrastructure for Finadli. Alpha Tallum, would you deny

that Breles and the port of Findali have seen major improvements over the past ten years? Our lumber itself is the cause of many riches for your pack in particular-” Eugene pointed a finger at the Alpha who had called him, and his neighboring Alphas, traitors. “You know we have the power to cut you off entirely from much-needed resources if we so choose—”

“That’s enough,” said the High Priestess, pounding a gavel on the table. I watched in awe as the elders began to whisper to each other, nodding to each other in shared sentiment. “Do you accept the nomination?”

“I accept.”

A round of spirited applause rang out, sending a rumble of vibration through the room.

“A vote will be held at the meeting’s end for the packs of the west, only. Majority will rule. We accept Eugene’s nomination.”

The gavel was smashed again, and the conference continued. Several men were asked to rise, one of which was Rowan. One by one they were announced as new Alphas... all of which had been titles passed down by their fathers, uncles, or grandfathers. It was obvious that a new generation of wolves were coming into power.

But my name hadn’t been called with the group.

I leaned over, patting Rowan on the back as he sat down, slightly red in the face at the attention.

“Is that it? You’re an Alpha now? I whispered.

He shook his head, leaning into me. “No, there’s a formal ceremony tomorrow. It’ll be held at the castle.”

I nodded and then began to lean back in my chair.

But suddenly my name was called.

“Troy Black, son of Behar, please come to the podium.”

A rush of voices swept over the crowd. I felt myself sink further into my seat as people exclaimed in surprise.

“Behar? Wasn’t he the son of King Kal?” someone behind me said in a harsh whisper.

I flushed, unable to move.

Rowan nudged me hard with his elbow. “Get up!”

“Okay-” I stood, and the shocked murmuring abruptly ceased. Everyone was looking at me.

I swallowed hard as I moved between the seats, murmuring apologies as I squeezed past several other men sitting in our aisle. Ethan was seated in a row closest to the podium, and he was watching me with interest. He gave me a nod in support as I reached the podium and faced the elders.

No one in the entire lecture hall spoke for what felt like an eternity. I felt sweat prickle on my brow but resisted the urge to reach up to wipe it away. It was hot under the lights of the platform, and I felt utterly exposed to the stares of everyone in the crowd.

“The kingdom of the Isles is yours by birthright,” said one of the elders, looking down at a piece of paper as he spoke. “As

the grandson of Romero on your mother’s side.”

Another rush of conversation swept through the lecture hall. The Priestess pounded the gavel on the table, demanding order.

“Is that true, Troy Black?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“And you wish to lay claim to your rightful title?” She was looking at me with a blank, business-like expression.

I nodded. “Yes. I mean to claim my title. I believe it’s in the best interest of the Isles that they have a true Alpha.”

“A child of enemies of the pack lands can have no claim to any throne!” someone shouted behind me, which was met with murmurs of agreement.

I chewed the inside of my lip. ‘Have a filter, for the love of the Goddess,’ I thought. ‘Don’t let them push you to speak out of turn.

“Alpha King Ethan has explained your situation,” said an elder toward the center of the table. He was a lean man, the youngest of the elders by far it seemed. He had blue eyes and a full head of rich, gray hair. I locked eyes with him, a certain sense of understanding passed between us. I wondered if he was the elder from Avondale.

“The Alpha King was the one who suggested I take the title—

“Because he is now your father-in-law?” the Priestess asked.

Another harsh murmur went through the crowd, followed by

a few laughs. I could sense Ethan turning in his seat to glare back at the people snickering.

“I believe he would have wanted me to accept the title regardless of my relationship with his daughter.” I wondered what Aaron of Red Lakes was thinking right now.

“Poldesse has been without a true Alpha since the end of the war. The people of the Isles have been operating without a pack for decades. Why take the title now, and not when you turned eighteen?” the Priestess said.

| swallowed, then turned to look out over the crowd. “I didn’t know my connections to the title until recently. I had no idea... I was an orphan. I never knew my parents, and I didn’t know | was related to Romero until Damian-”

“You’re really going to allow a man who worked with Damian to have the Isles?” someone shouted.

| winced, gripping the podium for support as an onslaught of nasty exclamations rang out through the crowd.

“Tell me, Troy, why should we back you as an Alpha? Despite the obvious objections of the Alphas of the two continents, this is your birthright. It is not up to us to say you cannot have your throne. We can, however, refuse to support your reign, which would make you an enemy. The support of the Alpha King of Valoria is not enough,” said one of the elders.

I looked up at him, taking a deep breath. “I grew up without a pack. I joined a group of orphans when I was four or five years old, I can’t remember the exact age. We were unattended, left to fend for ourselves. I stole to survive. I grew up to be a smuggler, a pirate. I was fortunate to even have that, if I’m

being honest. The future prospects of those born on the Isles are dim if not nonexistent... because of a war none of us were old enough to witness.” I squared my shoulders, straightening up to my full height.

“I am a father now. I cannot allow another generation of innocents to grow up packless to a dim future. I cannot sit back knowing the people of the Isles are living without support. I did not want to be Alpha. I was not raised as royalty. I don’t have the connections of those my age who have been born and bred to rule! But I am all you have.”

A hush fell over the room. The elder with the blue eyes looked me up and down as his companion to his left leaned to whisper in his ear.

I cleared my throat, continuing. I am not like my parents... or grandparents. I did not know them. I will never know them as you do. I will not deny my involvement in the invasion of Mirage,” I said, pausing to look out over the crowd, “but I will say I was heavily deceived, and once the truth was out, I did everything in my power to protect the daughter of the Alpha King, who is now my wife and mother of my sons.”

“Elder Lynus, can you vouch for the situation in the Isles?” asked the Priestess.

Lynus, the blue-eyed elder, nodded grimly, pursing his lips. I had been right about his being from Avondale and the Isles. “He is correct in the failures of the Isles under Damian’s rule,” was all that he said, but he turned to look at me with a hint of a smile touching his lips.

“The elders will deliberate. You may be seated, Troy Black.” The priestess slammed her gavel down once again, and the

meeting continued as I made my way back to my seat.

An hour passed and the conference broke for lunch. A huge spread had been laid out in the event hall, which I recognized as the place where the social had taken place many months ago.

I clung to Rowan's side. We had lost Ethan in the crowd before we had even made it out of the lecture hall, but occasionally I caught glimpses of him in heavy conversation with groups of men as they balanced plates of food in their hands.

"So you are the infamous Troy," came a hearty voice behind me. I turned around, face to face with Alpha Eugene of Red Lakes. "Don't worry, boy. Aaron is off sulking for one reason or another. I came to congratulate you on your new title, and to let you know you have the support of Red Lakes."

"Oh, 1-" I wasn't sure what to say. Eugene looked entirely friendly. "But I... uh, the whole Aaron thing?"

Eugene laughed so loudly several people in the near vicinity turned to look at us. I glanced at Rowan, who shrugged helplessly.

"Oh, Aaron thoroughly enjoyed himself on his little adventure. It turned him into a man, I dare say. He won't stop talking about it, and you, if I'm being direct. Has a bit of a crush on

you-"

Rowan choked on the coffee he had just swallowed, and I reached out to vigorously clap him on the back while maintaining eye contact with Eugene.

"You'll make a fine Alpha, and your sons will grow to be strong rulers. Good breeding stock, I'd say. I hope you know that whatever outcome my nomination to Alpha King of Findali may be, it won't have an adverse effect on our relationship, seeing as the title could, in theory, be considered your birthright as well-Ah, Rowan! My dear boy. Am I to be your father-in-law soon? Or is Hanna going to keep us both waiting?"

Rowan had regained his composure and walked to Eugene's side, putting his arm over his shoulder as he began to lead him away.

"We have a lot to discuss-" Rowan said, his voice drifting away into the crowd.

I stood with my plate in my hands, speechless and in shock. I looked around, unsure of what to do next, when I caught the eye of Lynus, who was standing in a small group near the table of food. He smiled at me, nodding, a gleam of hope in his eyes.

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 317

97: A Family Matter

“And they really didn’t talk about Tasia at all?” Myla moved about the room, glancing at her reflection in the mirror as she examined her hair. It had been styled in long, thin braids that touched her waist and had been woven with strips of turquoise silk. They had been fashioned in an intricate up do, and the bun of braids on the top of her head had been decorated with tiny jewels shaped like seashells. She looked absolutely exquisite, and I was very much looking forward to whatever dress she was wearing tonight.

I had forced Mom and Dad to include Myla, Cleo, and Ali son, who I was just getting to know, in our dress order for the gala being held at the castle to celebrate not only Rowan’s coronation but mine and Troy’s. It was a huge ask, but I had gotten my way, and now all of the women in my circle would be decked out in brand-new gowns and shoes for the event.

Keaton, however, had refused to let Ethan pay for Myla’s gown. He had purchased something for her himself, and its design was a secret. Keaton had agreed to come to the gala, mostly at Myla’s urging.

“Not a single word was spoken about it, according to Rowan and Troy,” Gemma said as a maid unwound her hair from several huge hot rollers.

I was only slightly worried about talking about Tasia in front of the maids, who were known to gossip. But to them, our conversation likely sounded like nothing more than a

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shared annoyance over a random woman, not an evil Dream Dancing sorceress who had just killed her entire pack.

“How odd,” I murmured, catching my own reflection in the mirror. I wasn’t totally happy with what I saw. I felt puffy, and no amount of concealer was going to cover the dark circles beneath my eyes.

“I’m sure the Alphas of the east are aware; how could they not be?” Myla peered down at her fresh manicure with inter

est.

“Dad is likely being picky with who he tells. I’m sure he still believes this is a family matter. Plus, Tasia hasn’t done any thing for weeks, not since what happened to Mom and Hanna in the temple. No one has seen or heard from her.” I rose from the vanity, waiting my turn to have the rollers taken from my hair. I looked at the dresses that were hanging from the canopy of my four-poster bed in clear garment bags.

I touched the bag that held the elaborate garment I was meant to wear. It was a soft baby blue gown with long sleeves made of sheer blue fabric, and the entire dress had tiny, embroidered silver and turquoise stars with pearls in their centers, making them look like little flowers.

It was a beautiful dress, styled in the official colors of the pack of Poldesse-blue, turquoise, and silver.

Tonight, I would be crowned Luna of Poldesse.

And I felt nothing but anxiety about the fact that nearly every Alpha and Beta of the pack lands would be in attendance.

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Tasia strikes tonight, at the gala?” I

turning away from the dress.

at me, her brow furrowed. “Oh, Maeve. Don’t think

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doubt she would, Maeve. If she plans on taking over the pack lands, she’d have no one to rule if she killed all the Alphas.” Gemma was right

sighed deeply, tucking my hands in the pockets of my robe as I sat down in front of the vanity again, letting the maid take the rollers out of my

brought the triplets into the room roughly an hour later with the help of another maid, who was carrying a very fussy George on her hip. I fed each triplet, my breasts feeling raw from the amount of breastfeeding and pumping I had been doing the entire day to make sure each baby would have enough milk for bottles while I was at the

wouldn't take a bottle, but Will, Charlie, and Oliver seemed happy to just be getting fed, and Ingra had assured us all that the boys would be alright during our

George back to Ingra's assistant, a young maid with an ample chest that George seemed to find quite comfortable as he nuzzled against her, closing his eyes. Gem ma then crossed the room and grabbed her dress, holding the garment bag over her arm as she bent down to kiss me on the top of

Maeve. Everything is going to be okay. This is one of the biggest nights of your life, you know. Try to

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will," I said soberly, not sure if I

by one, everyone left the room, and I kissed each of my sons goodnight as Ingra took her leave with them. I turned to the garment bag that held the dress, reaching up to unzip it so I could run my fingers over the

be only an hour or so now before the

the room without knocking, closing the door behind him. I was instantly more at ease the second I saw him, and felt the knot in the pit of my stomach loosen as he

in shock. Troy looked like a totally

His hair was swept back from his face and brushed behind his ears. He was clean-shaven, of course, and his skin was still sun-kissed from our time spent on the Persephone. He was wearing a black tuxedo that fit him like a glove, the contrast between his black suit and crisp white shirt setting off the colors of *his eyes*.

He was wearing a sash the same color as my dress, and it was emblazoned with the official emblems of Poldesse that showcased Poldesse's flag. Below the emblem of the flag was a crest. It was covered in jewels, and at its center was a waxing gibbous moon. Etched into the crest were some words written in a language I couldn't read. I peered at it, tilting my head as I tried to decipher the strange symbols. He touched the crest with his fingertips, shrugging.

“It means ‘Strong the Current.’ That’s the pack motto. Lynus said it hasn’t been worn since... well, since before *Romero’s time*.”

“It’s beautiful,” I whispered, then I realized I had no idea what the motto for Drogomor or Winter Forest was. **I’d likely**

find out tonight, especially since everyone was expected to be dressed in their finest outfits and **jewels**.

“Why aren’t you dressed yet?” he asked, walking over to me to kiss me lightly on **the lips**.

I reared away from him, my hands on his chest. “I don’t want to get lipstick on **you-**”

“I don’t care,” he growled, kissing me so deeply my knees went weak, and any anxiety I had been feeling was suddenly replaced by deep, primal longing.

I pulled away from the kiss, reaching down to the vanity to grab a tissue so I could wipe the soft berry-colored lipstick from his *mouth*.

“This color looks rather nice on you,” I said softly, teasing him.

“Thanks,” he smacked his lips, then pulled me into an embrace, careful not to mess up my hair and makeup. “I wish we could just... stay here for a moment, with each *other*.”

“We could skip the gala,” I replied, half teasing.

He shook his head, pulling away to face me. “You’re be coming a Luna tonight. I wouldn’t want to miss that for *the world*.”

Troy and I walked down the first flight of stairs, at first hand in hand, but it became obvious that the sheer weight of my dress and the amount of flowing fabric was going to make the journey to the ballroom difficult without using **the railing**

for support.

entire family was waiting at the bottom of the stairs in the foyer, dressed to the nines. Jewelry gleamed in the light of the foyer’s grand crystal chandelier, and

everyone turned to look at us as we descended the stairs, their hair fixed, wearing immaculate gowns

had on a fuchsia-colored gown that hugged her curves in a way I hadn't thought possible. The fact that she had an almost four-month-old baby seemed unimaginable as she stepped forward to take my

always cleaned up well, and I wasn't surprised when I caught Ernest trying his hardest not to stare at his mate's ass while we arranged ourselves for a group

standing next to Rowan, dressed in a floor length amber-colored gown that looked like a flame. It was an incredible color on her, and the amber hues reflected in her eyes, which turned her normally cinnamon colored irises flaked with green on fire. Her hair was loose down her back, pinned away from her face, and she seemed comfortable with her hand tucked into the crook of Rowan's

Caroline, Vicky and Paul's daughter, was in attendance tonight, dressed in a pale pink ball gown. She looked slightly embarrassed as Paul and Vicky fussed over her, but I was willing to bet the color in her cheeks was more from excitement

the one who stole the show, however. Her gown was a ballgown of similar style to mine, with long sleeves and a full skirt. But her gown was a glittering, muted silver in color with a high neckline. Her white hair was loose, curled

very full, and on her head, she wore a white-gold tiara littered

looked like the Moon Goddess herself, and I couldn't help

at Rowan between the pictures, watching him lean to whisper into Hanna's ear. He was wearing a sash much like Troy's, but a deep amber in color. A crest and flag were fixed to his sash as

becoming a Luna, and Rowan an Alpha. It felt like everything that had happened to us over the past year had led us to this

was still having a hard time ignoring the elephant in the

knew I needed to get Dad alone before the Alphas started arriving. I wouldn't have a chance to talk to him in private when the gala began. Once the family

photoshoot ended, I beelined for him before Troy even noticed I had left his side, and forcibly pulled Dad into the corner of the

to talk,” I said, a little breathless. The dress I was wearing was incredibly flattering on my new curves, but wasn’t the easiest to move

“I have to start greeting our-”

we going to do something about Tasia? Why this gala? Why the conference if not to warn the other packs.

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 318

Advisor to the Alpha

I had lost Maeve in the swell of the crowd an hour ago. Around me was a sea of finery, moving in the rhythm of a string quartet. I had never witnessed such luxury, and a large part of me hoped I wouldn’t be expected to hold parties of such a size when Maeve and I inevitably moved to Avondale and lived in the decrepit and long-neglected castle along the shore.

We’d have quite a bit of work to do before we would ever be able to be the kind of hosts that Ethan and Rosalie were right at this moment.

But this wasn’t my party.

It was, in all aspects, for Rowan.

I could just see the top of his head as I leaned against one of the columns on a far wall, a tall glass of scotch in my hand as I watched the crowd. He was talking to a group of men and their companions, likely Lunas or Betas’ wives. He seemed at ease as he spoke, his hair trembling as he laughed, leaning into the conversation.

He didn’t give himself credit for how good he could play the part. I wondered, as I lifted my glass to my lips, if I had the wherewithal to play Alpha as well.

“Are you hiding?” Hanna said as she approached, looking flushed and slightly uncomfortable. She had a glass of cham

pagne clutched in her hand so tightly that her knuckles were white.

“Yeah, you could say that.”

“I am too,” she sighed, sipping from the champagne. “My dad is here. Did you know that?”

“Oh, yes. I met him...” I gave her a look, and to my surprise, she laughed, which I don’t think she did very often.

“Poor Aaron. I can’t think how he must feel right now. I think the fact that you and Rowan, especially you, are becoming Alphas is overshadowing the idea of him becoming Alpha King of the West someday. That is....” She looked a little weary suddenly, peering up at me through her dark lashes.

“I have no interest in being Alpha King of Findali, Hanna.”

“But it is your birthright through your grandfather, from what I’ve heard.”

“And who did you hear that from?”

“This may be a party for Rowan, but all anyone can talk about is you.” She sipped from her champagne, scanning the crowd. A few heads were turned in our direction.

I let myself blush, somewhat thankful to hear someone close to me say it out loud. I realized I hadn’t ever had so much as a polite conversation with Hanna before this moment, but I found her nice, easy of temper, and just as unso- cial as myself. You had to be those things to be successful in a relationship with people like Maeve and Rowan, who tended to steal the show wherever they went.

I looked around, hoping to set my gaze on my wife. She was hard to miss in that fluffy blue gown and her towering height. I thought I could see her copper-blond curls, but I could have been wrong. Anyway, she was likely enjoying her self, and for that I was thankful.

stumbled up to us, clutching Gemma by the arm as they laughed. They were both drunk; that was obvious.

Hanna! I was looking for you!” Gemma slurred, her mouth stretched into a beaming smile. Gemma was really beautiful all done up, and Ernest seemed to notice. He was currently whispering in her ear, and based on the color of her cheeks, I would be willing to bet they would disappear from the gala

altogether and go back to their room to enjoy them selves while George was staying the night in the nursery with the rest of the boys. George would have to take a bottle tonight whether he liked it or not.

if the two of them could manage to get up the stairs with nothing but champagne coursing through their

smiled as I brought my scotch to my lips, sipping the drink slowly and enjoying the burn of it while I watched Gem ma fire off words in rapid succession to Hanna, who was try ing her damndest to make sense of whatever she was

from my friends to look out at the crowd once more, catching the eye of Lynus, the elder who represented Avondale. He was staring right at me, and lifted his flute of champagne in my direction as he nodded his head. I lifted my scotch in a similar salute.

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surprise, he motioned me

mumbled, glancing at Hanna before walking out of our quiet sanctuary.

all will have seen Troy at the conference yesterday,” Lynus said as I walked up to the group of men standing in a tight semi-circle around him.

eyes took me in skeptically, but no one said a harsh word. They just stared, which made me more uncomfortable than an insult would

a lot about you, Troy Black. What an inter esting story you have,” said a man of roughly fifty. He was tall and lean with graying brown hair and kind, dark eyes.

nodded, wishing I had pockets to tuck my hands into to stop myself from fidgeting. “Only bad things, I hope,” I said without

who was introduced as Silas Evermore, a promi nent businessman with ties to the Alpha of Breles, laughed heartily. “To be sure, to be sure.” Silas took a swig of his scotch, then motioned toward my glass, which I was gripping for dear life. “Not a champagne man, I take

prefer beer, but this is too fancy an event for that, I’m afraid.”

is true. Alpha King Ethan has really outdone himself with this shindig, hasn't he? Do you know his son well? Rowan?"

searched Silas's eyes for a moment, finding them friendly

do. He's my wife's brother and a good friend

Silas arched his brow, leaning forward into the semi-circle of curious companions. "And were you not friends

"**Of** course not." I laughed, bringing my drink to my lips before adding, "He beat me up the first time we met. I deserved it, of course. I did kidnap his sister and aid in Damian's invasion, after **all**."

A *shocked* silence fell over the group, and everyone was staring at me. Silas's mouth was forming a perfect O as he continued to stare, surprised by my words. What was I supposed to say, if not the truth?

But then he laughed, the sound booming over nearby conversations, which caused other groups of party-goers to stop and stare. I sipped my drink, shrugging my shoulders at Lynus, who was dumbfounded.

"You were right about him, Lynus. What a **gem**."

I wasn't sure how to respond, but the conversation carried on without me. Lynus eventually moved to my side, close enough to reach out and tap me lightly on the *elbow*.

"*I'd* like to talk to you, in private."

"Alright," I answered, then the two of us dipped our heads in farewell to the group of men and I followed Lynus out of the ballroom to an outside terrace, which overlooked the *gar den*.

Lynus walked to the edge of the terrace, out of earshot from other small groups and couples who were mingling in the coolness of the night. He glanced around to make sure we were truly alone, which sent a shiver of unease up my spine.

For the first time that evening, I felt as though my suit was a bit too tight.

"**Troy, you** are not at all what I was expecting when Alpha Ethan summoned the Elders to hold a conference," he said, his voice edged with seriousness.

“I didn’t mean to disappoint-”

“*I knew your parents. Behar, specifically.*”

I exhaled deeply, nostrils flaring. “I assure you I am not at **all-**”

“**I’m not** worried about that, Troy. I think you’ll make a fine Alpha for Poldesse. I know what it’s like there, on the Isles. I lived there during the start of Damian’s reign. You would’ve been in your infancy, then. I remember... listen. I-” he paused, looking down into his empty flute of champagne before turning to me, his eyes glistening with *sadness*.

“*I wasn’t* sure what to expect from you. I know Ethan to be a level-headed and thoughtful man. The news that you, the child of Maddalyn and Behar, had not only been found but had married Ethan’s daughter, shocked everyone. I can’t even begin to explain what was said. But you must know this, and know it well. Poldesse needs... it needs more than you realize. Damian’s court was, and still is, rife with corruption. You’re stepping into a political warzone the second the High Priestess places that silly little crown on your head *tonight.*”

Lynus straightened his back, clearing his throat. “And, the Isles are islands of rogues now, Troy. In reality, those who still pledge loyalty to the pack number in the double-digits. It’s not good, not good at all.”

“*What are you suggesting I do?*” I asked, genuinely curious. I had no idea what the f*ck I was doing, which he was making very clear.

“Clean house. Set firm, immovable boundaries. Win back the Isles with force, if *necessary-*”

force. That is not the Alpha I mean to be.”

diplomacy, whatever you want. But it needs to be done, and done

is your role in all of this, exactly? You made it sound like you no longer live in the

do not. I haven’t for a long time. I worked under your grandfather, Romero, long ago now, before Ethan and the like were ever born... Times were different then, very harsh. Every pack was constantly at war. The Isles was the only place where only one Alpha ruled, you know, and it was at the center

of what felt like everything at the time. So much power he had, your grandfather. He ruined himself for wanting

you think that's what I'm going to be?"

don't, otherwise I wouldn't have thrown my support behind you when the Elders were deliberating our stance on the subject. I shouldn't even be telling you this, you have to understand. As an Elder of the High Council I'm supposed to remain unbiased, to see the politics of the pack lands as whole, for greater good, and all of that."

you trust me, given my background?" It was the question I had been asking myself for months, ever since the moment Maeve had forgiven me for tricking her, for lying. Ethan and his family had supported me with very few

on the matter, and now the entirety of our kind seemed to be willing to give me a shot.

like I said, you were not who we thought you would be. You are not out for vengeance. You are not out to control and destroy. You look at your wife, a future White Queen, for Goddess's sake, with all of the love and devotion that is possible. We are shocked, Troy Black, because you were supposed to be someone very, very different."

"Like my parents?"

took a long, meditative pause. He seemed lost in thought, his eyes glossing over with memories likely long for gotten. "I may be one of the only ones to say that Behar and Maddalyn weren't inherently bad people. Not at first. Who knows what they could have been, what they could have done, if they had found each other sooner, in a different situation. I knew Maddalyn as a girl, you see. She was lively, spirited, and kind. It was Romero who poisoned her, molded her into what she became. And Behar? He was a right pain in the ass from the beginning. I don't know if he would have changed much-

"I knew him as kind-

was not the man who raised you as an infant,

chest tightened so rapidly that I found it hard to take a breath. I opened my mouth to argue, but the words didn't come. Fleeting memories of my life

passed before my eyes, two or three snippets of a time before I was four years old.

“Then who was?”

close to both Behar and Maddalyn, that’s all I

sure Ethan explained how it wasn’t supposed to be that way. You were, essentially, one of the first orders of business the High Council was to see to, and our first failure. You fell through our fingers, and for that I am deeply sorry.”

shook my head, unsure of what to say in reply. I drained my scotch, wanting

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 319

Chapter 99: The Coronation

Maeve

“Where the hell is he?” I asked Myla, who was leaning against one of the columns in the ballroom, looking a little flustered herself. She was dressed in an insanely flattering sea-green colored gown, the same color as the silky ribbons woven into her braids. She shrugged, tilting the remaining champagne in the flute she was holding into her mouth.

“Where is anyone we know? There has to be five-hundred people here, if not more. I haven’t seen Keaton since we entered the castle!”

“I’m surprised Keaton even agreed to come. It sounds like he and Troy had a major falling out-”

“Keaton is mad at Troy for leaving their little group of pirates, that’s all. They’re brothers in all aspects but one. They’ll be friends again.”

“Just not Alpha and Beta.”

To my surprise, Myla shrugged, tapping her flute with her nails.

“I should probably get another drink. Gemma is way ahead of us, you know. Last I saw her she was tearing up the dance floor with Ernest. I don’t think she knows up from down at this point.”

“Oh, they deserve a little fun. Especially now that Ernest isn’t tied into being all poised and proper. I’ve never seen him

so happy, honestly.” I ran my hands down my dress, wondering if I’d be able to dance in it.

“I can get you another drink, if you want?”

“No, it’s okay. I should probably go to the nursery and, uh, use that Goddess-forsaken breast pump again. It’s basically what they use on cows, you know. That’s what I am. A dairy cow. I hate to pump and dump and waste this liquid gold, but the babies have enough to last them for the night, and I have been drinking.”

“From breeder to feeder,” Myla uttered dramatically, and I almost choked on what little remained of my champagne.

Just thinking about pumping made my breasts ache, but they were full and threatening to soak through my gown if I didn’t do something about it, and fast. I had pumped enough milk to see the boys happily fed for the rest of the night, but that didn’t stop my body from deciding it needed to make more.

I sighed, looking around once more for Troy before leaving the ballroom and heading toward the servants’ quarters, which were bustling with noisy activity. The nursery was on the second floor and was a cozy little apartment of sorts with a room for the nanny, a playroom, and a bedroom for the babies of both our family and those who belonged to the servants.

“Can I help you with anything, Princess?” said a maid, her face flushed and hair frazzled from the activities of the evening.

“Oh, no. It’s alright. I was just going up to the nursery to uh, to uh...” I trailed off, feeling sheepish.

“Oh my dear, the babies have gone to bed hours ago. Ingra is upstairs with them,” she replied, tilting her head toward the servant’s stairwell that led up to the upper floors of the

castle.

“I just need to uh, to um...” Goddess, I should’ve had that second glass of champagne.

“You need the pump? Ingra thought you might eventually. Come with me.” She turned on her heel and sped off, and I hiked up my skirts to follow her, careful not to get in the way as servants passed by with trays stacked with used plates and silverware.

led me to one of the sitting rooms reserved especially for the use of our workers, which was cozy, comfortable, and a quiet refuge from the hustle and bustle of the rest of the servants’ quarters and busy

closed the door behind us, helping me undo the clasps on the back of my dress so I could free my arms from my sleeves and fold the fabric that covered my chest down over

ah, what a relief it was to sit in solitude for a moment, letting the milk flow. I felt renewed in a way, ready to face the rest of the evening as the maid silently carried the pump away and helped me

are just fine upstairs. Master William had a bit of a fuss but settled down once he was placed in bed with the others,” she told me softly, clasping my dress and reaching up to adjust my immaculate

doesn’t like being alone,” I said with a somber smile, a wave of guilt washing over me. I should be with them,

not parading around in a fluffy, star-covered dress and

maybe Troy was right in that I needed a moment to just be

looked at my reflection in the dainty little mirror on the wall, unsure of what I saw. I looked regal. I looked like a

An imposter.

was time for that second glass

followed the maid back through the servants’ quarters, telling her repeatedly to find me if anything were to happen to the boys, even if it was the smallest thing that felt huge to me, like they just needed comfort, or

found myself back in the main hallways of the castle, which were busy with passing servants and party-goers dressed in their fineries. I began to walk

back toward the ball room, taking my time. People were starting to funnel inside from the garden, heading into the ballroom from the

be time, I thought, taking a deep breath. Rowan would be crowned Alpha

then Troy and I would be crowned Alpha of Luna of a pack we only knew as

I could take another step toward the ballroom, someone had me by the waist, and I was whisked into one of the many small sitting rooms that lined the main hallway on the first floor. I yelped in surprise, but found myself face to face with

the hell have you been? I've been looking for you -" | stammered, my heart racing. He gave me a hungry look, and then slammed the door closed, the lock clicking in place. "What are you

"I want you," he growled.

mouth dropped out. "Right now? You're about to be come an Alpha in like, five

of time," he said as he closed in on me, embracing me roughly. "We haven't done this in

smell like scotch -" he kissed me thoroughly, and I pulled away, laughing. "And you taste like it

scotch if that makes a difference," he replied as he backed me up against the wall, running his hands over my waist. "I want you out of this

"Troy, you are wasted!"

"... yes, I am."

He paused, breathing heavily for a moment before he arched his brow, giving me a curious look.

Then, in a blur of motion, he disappeared beneath my skirts. I yelped again in surprise, smacking him repeatedly.

"*Get* out of there! If **someone sees**,"

He had my underwear between his teeth and ripped them clean off of my body. I lost all ability to think rationally at that moment, and in a split second he had his mouth on **my flesh**,

and I succumbed to him.

Thank Goddess he had locked the door. If anyone had entered the room they would have caught us in a very compromising position as he knelt, all of his body hidden by the skirt of my ball gown, everything but *his shoes*.

“**Oh**, Goddess,” | moaned, breathless, arching my hips to ward him.

His hands were gripping my thighs, keeping me pinned against **the wall**.

A ripple of loud applause seemed to vibrate the entire castle, the sound coming from the ballroom. It distorted as a wave of ecstasy washed over my body, weakening my knees to the point that Troy’s grip on me was the only reason I was still *upright*.

“**We** have to go-” | panted, feeling more like falling into a heap of blue fabric on the floor then righting myself and pretending like Troy hadn’t just forcibly gone down on me right before I was crowned Luna.

He was fumbling beneath my skirts, trying to free himself from the many layers of fabric. I helped him out, worried for a moment he would tear **the fabric**.

He jumped up, exhilarated. His hair was a mess, and I fought with him for a moment as I tried to flatten it, but his curls were **impossible**.

“I look fine, s-Stop! Stop it!” he swatted my hand away as he bent back to the floor to retrieve what was left of my un**derwear**.

“What am I supposed to do now?” I fussed, pointing to the lacey fabric that was now torn in two pieces. *He shrugged*,

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and tossed them into the fireplace. “**Hey!**”

“*You won’t* be needing them,” he said shortly, then glanced at me, a boyish gleam in his eyes, “Especially **later**.”

“That’s enough. Let’s go before we miss our coronation

Troy stepped toward me, running his hands over my arms. “I love you,” he said, having lost some of the slur in his *voice*.

love you. You were just using me to sober up,

then took me by the hand and led me out of the

was standing on the stage, facing the crowd as Dad pinned the royal brooch of Drogomor on his sash. I was clasping Troy’s hand, squeezing it, as the coronation took

does the crest say? I can’t see it from here!” I asked Troy, who narrowed his eyes as he peered up at the

said something in a language I didn’t understand before clarifying, “it means Keepers of the

I asked, knitting my brow. I looked back up at the stage, trying to get a glimpse of the crest of Winter

pleased with his work, patting the brooch of Drogomor gently as he moved out of the way and the High Priestess of the Church of the Moon Goddess

began to pray over Rowan, then stopped to face

surprise, Hanna had stepped onto the stage and was quickly ushered

I whispered, excitement bubbling through me. I knew her coming to Mirage had been a massive step in their relationship,

do that, not being married and all?” Troy asked in a low

don’t know, but I -” I noticed the ring on her finger, shimmering in the light of the chandelier. It was green and looked to be made of stone. I swallowed hard in disbelief. “Wow, Rowan. You

in awe as a sash was placed over her shoulder. She smiled shyly at Rowan, who looked

were crowned Alpha and Luna of

“Wow,” I whispered, fighting back tears.

chosen to keep Lance in his position as Beta, which seemed to please everyone in the ballroom. They clapped heartily as Rowan, Hanna, Lance, and his wife left the stage and returned to the

turn. Come on.” Troy took me by the hand as a war rior approached us, motioning for us to come forward and ascend the stairs to the stage. My heart was in my throat, my body racked by nerves. We’d have to do all of this a second time when we reached Avondale, whenever that

Elders were standing behind us, and I noticed Troy nod to an elderly man as we took our positions on stage. I wondered who he was, but was quickly forced to leave his gaze as the High Priestess stepped forward, leaning toward Troy to speak into his

no Beta?” she asked, her voice edged with

his mouth to speak, but a sudden rush of surprised conversation swept over the ballroom. The High Priestess stepped out of the way, turning to face the crowd, giving us a full view of Keaton making his way toward

dressed in full pirate regalia. A jet-black tri-corn hat was perched on the top of his head, decorated with tropical feathers and slightly worn at the edges. His hair was loose, flowing over his shoulders in waves of gold, separated by braids that had small golden beads on

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Chapter 100: I'm Yours

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Our bedroom felt exceedingly quiet, but the silence was broken by the swell of chatter and music coming from the castle's grounds, where the gala was still taking place. It was late now, the sky dappled with stars until a half quarter moon.

—

Troy was helping me out of my dress in our spacious bathroom as I took the pins out of my hair, letting the curls fall over my shoulders as I sighed a breath of relief. It felt odd seeing the jeweled tiara I was wearing sitting on the bathroom counter, surrounded by a tangle of hairpins.

Troy kissed my shoulder as I pulled my shelves from the dress, his touch sending a ripple of desire through my body.

“You’re covered in glitter,” he laughed against my skin as he ran his hand down over my exposed waist.

“Gemma found a new lotion at the market in Mirage. It has glitter in it and smells like cotton candy. She insisted I wear it.”

“Mmm... that’s why you smell like sugar.”

“You noticed?”

“Earlier, in the sitting room when I...” He looked over my shoulder at our reflection in the mirror, giving me a knowing

smile.

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I felt suddenly self-conscious as he looked at my reflection. My body felt foreign to me still, my new curves strange and unwanted. I closed my eyes as he reached down to unclasp the hook and pin that held my skirts in place, causing them to fall around my ankles. I was totally, completely exposed.

“Troy, don’t-”

“What’s wrong?” He turned me to face him, standing so close that my breasts pressed into his chest. They were hard as rocks and streaked with purple stretch marks, so heavy I felt like my back would break. How could he look at me and want me? Let alone recognize me?

Exhaustion and grief at the fact that our sons were still in the nursery, fast asleep, washed over me and brought tears to my eyes. Troy ran his knuckles over my cheek, leaning down to brush a soft kiss across my forehead.

“Today was a lot, wasn’t it?” he whispered into my hair.

I nodded, resting my head against his shoulder. His hands moved over my back, his touch soft against my skin. I melted into him. It had been several weeks since we had been together intimately and alone, always separated by babies and always called away on errands related to either the moon stones, Tasia, or Troy's ascension to the throne of Poldesse.

"Yeah," I replied, unsure if the reply was even audible.

"I have glitter all over my hands now," he laughed, taking a step away from me.

With his body no longer shielding me from his full gaze, I felt like cowering, like covering myself. But I saw his desire

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clearly, his c*ck rigid against the zipper of his dress pants. He smiled at me, his cheek dimpling as he turned and opened the glass door to the oversized shower and turned the hot water on full blast. Within seconds the bathroom was full of steam.

"You should get in with me," he said as he unbuttoned his shirt, tossing it on the floor.

Goddess, he was a beautiful man. Months of hard labor and physical trials during our journey through the pass had only added to his strength. It had been the complete opposite for me, my body stretching apart to make room for not one, but three children.

"You'll feel better after a hot shower."

The idea of hot water running over my shoulders and back was too delicious to ignore, and the thought of it caused my breasts to harden sharply, milk beginning to trickle over my breasts and down my stomach. I reached down involuntarily, touching the long scar that stretched from one side of my belly to the other, another wave of self-consciousness washing over me and causing me to freeze.

"Maeve-"

"Will I ever be like I was?" I said, the words falling from my mouth before I could stop them.

Troy had been in the act of taking off his pants, and he paused, looking up at me for a moment before he pulled them off and kicked them to where he had thrown his shirt. “No, not fully.”

I hung my head. “Does that bother you?”

“Me?” To my surprise, he laughed, slightly taken aback by the question. “Are you kidding me, Maeve? You gave me three sons. You carried them in your body for months. You gave them life, risking your own and....” He paused, closing the distance between us, running his hands over the swell of my hips. “I’d be lying if I didn’t say I was slightly jealous of the closeness. Of the fact they get all of you.”

“Jealous?” I stammered.

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He leaned in, brushing a kiss along my neck. “This is the first time since we met that you haven’t been fully mine.”

“But, I am yours,” I breathed, closing my eyes as his mouth traveled down my neck and onto my shoulders.

“Say that again,” he growled, his voice low and brassy.

“I’m yours.”

He nipped the skin over my collarbone, then ran his hands over my arms, squeezing.

“Still strong, stronger now from carrying the boys around. I know you can still knock someone’s teeth out if given the opportunity,” he whispered hoarsely, his touch leaving my arms to run down the length of my thighs. “You could choke me out with these. There’s nothing I want more than your thighs around my neck and my head between your legs-”

“Troy!” I rasped, unable to hide my surprise.

He laughed into my neck, then bent his head, gently taking one of my nipples in his mouth. I sucked in my breath through gritted teeth, but he was gentle, knowing how much my breasts currently pained me.

“Don’t even get me started on these. And your ass?” | squeaked in surprise, giggling as he cupped my ass in his hands. “Do I even need to say it?”

I was blushing deeply by this total worship of my body. In a split second he had me up on the counter, kissing me so deeply that I felt at a loss for air. All that was separating us were his boxers and the cascade of steam dancing around our bodies.

The worship continued in the shower, gentle and wanting at first. Despite our fatigue, we were in no obvious rush. This was the first time we’d had sex since the babies were born. It felt, in a lot of ways, like the first time all over again.

I had proved I could handle him, and soon he had me pressed against shower, my breasts pinned against the tile as he took me from behind, his fingers tangled in my hair and one hand clutching my hip as he roughly slid inside me, taking every liberty with my body I could possibly allow.

He kissed me, and against his lips, I begged him for my own release. A wave of pure, electric ecstasy enveloped me and I was limp with bliss and mingled exhaustion.

My mind felt peaceably blank as we stood beneath the stream of the shower, letting the water wash over us, the tile floor glistening with glitter. It was a baptism of sorts, washing away our old lives, and when after a long while we finally stepped out of the shower, it was as though we had been re born into our new rules, as parents, as rulers, as husband and wife. Together.

An hour later we lay awake in bed, our fingers knitted to gether as he listened to the party continue on without us

downstairs.

“I guarantee Gemma and Ernest are going to be absolute ly worthless tomorrow,” Troy laughed, rolling over to face me.

“Oh, well, they needed to let loose I think. We can take George for the day. I can nurse him, you know. We can take all the boys for a walk around the grounds.”

“If it’s not littered with drunken bodies sleeping in the tall grass, that is,” Troy smiled, reaching out to touch my cheek.

We were restless for whatever reason. I felt an emptiness in the bed with us, between us... something that was making it impossible to sleep.

"I feel it too," Troy whispered, kissing my knuckles. "Do you want to go get them?"

"Yes," I said, and in a split second we were both out of bed and hurriedly getting dressed, mutually needing the boys in our room with us in order to even get a fraction of sleep.

Dressed in pajamas and with our feet bare on the stone floor, we quietly made our way through the castle, which was still bustling with noise.

We went to the nursery, finding Ingra awake with George sleeping on her ample chest as she sat in a rocking chair.

A silent understanding passed between us, and she nodded to the little bedroom off the main apartment, where all three boys were laid out on a bed, asleep.

Troy scooped Will and Charlie into his arms while I cradled Oli against my chest, exhaling deeply at the sensation of his weight in my arms. Much, much better.

We traveled quietly through the castle, and had just made it to the stairwell when a voice rang out behind us, and we turned to see a man leaning against the wall, his arms crossed.

"Those must be the princes I've heard so much about," he said, his eyes sharp and darkly colored.

I opened my mouth to speak, but stole a quick glance at Troy, whose expression caught me off guard. He was glaring, his brow furrowed and his shoulders so rigid I thought they would burst through his gray T-shirt.

"What are you doing here?" Troy snapped through gritted teeth.

The man stepped forward into the light, giving me a better view of his face. He was young, roughly Troy's age. He had dark hair and pale skin, and a

menacing demeanor that sent a chill up my spine and caused me to clutch Oli to my chest.

“I didn’t want to miss the opportunity to see you become Alpha of Poldesse. I didn’t believe it, at first. Still can’t, if I’m being honest.” The unfamiliar man tilted his head, looking me up and down with a smirk.

“Leave this place, now,” Troy growled, the sound making all of the down hairs on my arms stand on edge. He was livid; I could feel the fury spilling off of him.

“Nah, I think I’ll stay for the remainder of the party,” he said directly to me, his gaze raking hotly over my figure.

Troy abruptly turned to me, practically stacking Will and

Charlie in my arms as I fumbled to hold them all at once. “Go. Upstairs. Now. And lock the door.”

“Why?”

But Troy had stalked forward and grabbed the man by the collar of his shirt, and the two of them disappeared through a door off the hallway.

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Chapter 101: The Power of the Next White Queen

C

Troy

“What the f*ck are you doing here?” I spat, adrenaline coursing through my veins as I locked eyes with Hayden. It had been years since I’d seen his face. He had healed well from the injuries we, the beach rats of Suntra, had given him, but I just see the long scar that ran along his jaw on the left side of his face where Keaton had taken liberties with his knife.

“Heard a rumor you were a big shot; thought I’d see so for myself.” Hayden rocked on heels, looking around. “Such wealth. How lucky of you to bag an Alpha’s daughter.”

I ground my teeth as I frantically mind linked with Keaton, giving him my location and telling him to bring Robbie, and possibly Rowan, if Rowan’s attention could be spared. Ernest was too far gone with drink to be useful, unfortunately. I felt the hair on my arms prickle to attention as Hayden’s dark stare studied my face, taking me in.

“You have no business here-”

“Oh, but I do. When is Keaton getting here? I’d like to see him, that filthy bastard. It’s been too long.”

The door opened, and Keaton stepped inside, holding the door to allow a shocked-looking Robbie and a confused Rowan to step in behind him before he slammed the door shut and locked it.

knew I should’ve f*cking killed you when I had the chance!” Keaton was red in the face, his eyes moving from Hayden to me.

‘Myla and Hanna are upstairs with Maeve and the boys,’ he said over the mind-link, tilting his head toward Hayden. ‘I’m going to kill him, right here, right

“Who the hell is this guy?” Rowan asked sharply, picking up on the energy in the room, which was nothing more than an office space with a desk, sparse bookshelf, and chair.

Hayden smiled broadly, setting his gaze on Rowan. “Ah, the Alpha of Drogomor. Tasia has told me so much about you. Tell me, your mate is Hanna, correct? That absolute vixen that stood with you on stage?”

All of us stared at him, mouths agape.

“Did you just say Tasia?” Keaton ground out, his eyes flaming. I took a step away from Hayden so I was between Keaton and Robbie, and placed my hand on Keaton’s forearm. He was trembling.

“Of course, I know her. I work for her. Also, sleeping with her... but so is Carl, so it’s obviously not serious. Oh, and it’s consensual. I’m a changed man-” Hayden was interrupted by Keaton leaping forward, his fist slamming dead center in Hayden’s face.

All of us rushed to pull Keaton off of him, and Rowan looked at me helplessly, mouthing, “What the f*ck is going on?”

“Get off me!” Keaton screeched, his words a furious mur mur as Robbie’s massive hand came over his mouth.

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“This is Hayden Wells,” I panted, looking over at Rowan. “He killed Keaton’s little sister.”

“After he took her without her consent!” Robbie viciously added, his gaze locked on Hayden’s neck. It took a lot for Robbie to get angry and physical, but I could tell he was thinking about what it would feel like to snap the bastard’s neck.

“And got her pregnant,” Keaton added with a choking sadness, flexing his hand.

“Good Goddess,” Rowan breathed, looking around the room before settling his gaze on Hayden. “Should we just kill him?”

“Yes,” Keaton sneered, stepping forward, but Robbie and I caught him by the arms.

“Not-not yet,” I stammered, my heart racing.

“Tasia’s here, ain’t she?” Robbie said hoarsely, pulling Keaton back in line with the rest of us. Hayden reached up and touched his split lip, his teeth bloody as he smiled.

“She’s everywhere, but I’m sure your mate knows that, doesn’t she, Rowan?” He spit blood onto the carpet.

“Tasia is an enemy of the pack lands-” Rowan began, but fell silent as Hayden shook his head back and forth, laughing.

“Oh, is she? I heard no one talking about her during this fancy party. Not a single word about her. No one even said her name.”

“Where is she?” I shoved Keaton behind me. “What do you know?”

“Nothing really. I just came to scope things out. My great -grandfather did as much, but didn’t get his hands on the girl like he was supposed to... that pretty piece, your wife.” Hay – den pointed at me, and I felt the same fury currently rippling through Keaton.

“Your great-grandfather?” I asked, trying to maintain my composure.

“Horace, of course. He’s dead.”

When was the last time I thought about Horace? He was incredibly old, and had battled with Romero in the tower during the invasion. I wasn’t surprised he was dead.

Rowan was looking from Hayden to me, trying to make sense of our connection. I sucked in my breath, turning to Rowan, holding my hands out in surrender as I decided to explain, in detail, why we should have killed Hayden seven years ago.

“Hayden used to be part of our... gang. A crewman. A use less one, but we thought he didn’t have a family. He uh... lied, obviously. There weren’t women or girls in our crew. The fe male orphans formed their own groups around the islands. It was safer that way, for all of us. Keaton’s sister... her name was Michelle... she was the only girl we allowed in our crew. And Hayden... we mentioned what happened to her.”

Keaton spit on the floor, the substance landing just in front of Hayden.

“What did you do when it happened?” Rowan asked.

I felt the tension in the room starting to lessen, our com munal adrenaline and hatred ebbing as I shook my head, thinking back on that day.

“Which part?” Keaton hissed.

“We beat the living hell out of him, and sent him off in a rowboat,” I said, glancing at Keaton.

“Why not just kill him?”

“Because Michelle didn’t want us to be tortured and executed by Damian’s warriors,” I answered, closing my eyes against the memory of the seventeen-year-old girl with thick golden hair. Michelle had only been a year younger than me when she died, and only a few years younger than Keaton. Keaton had raised her since she was a year old, when he was just a child himself.

“He slit her f*cking throat,” Keaton’s voice was a strained

cry.

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I felt myself on the edge of tears.

“Why?” Rowan asked Hayden.

Hayden shrugged. “I didn’t want to be a dad to some sea scum’s baby-”

Keaton lost all control. He had Hayden on the floor in an instant, smashing his head against the wall. None of us moved to stop him this time. Even Rowan had his hands balled into fists, his eyes glossing over with the fury we now all shared.

Whatever this was, was justified.

“If you kill me, you’ll never find Tasia before it’s too late. And Carl. He’s-he’s almost worse than-” Hayden’s eyes rolled back in his head.

I stepped forward, placing my hand on Keaton’s shoulder. “Stop,” I whispered, the word disobeying what I actually wanted him to do.

“What is Tasia planning to do?” Rowan asked.

Hayden moaned, reaching up to touch the back of his head as Keaton rose, reluctantly backing away from him.

“Kill, and kill some more. Take over Valoria, then the west. The Isles are currently of no interest to her. She can place an Alpha of her choosing-”

“I am the Alpha of the Isles-”

“And yet you are not there, are you Troy? Damian’s do main, it was. My parents perished in the battle that took place in the forests north of here, did you know that? All I had was my decrepit old great-grandfather. That was it. Do you know why I joined your little gang of beach rats? I was sent there, to watch over you, Troy, to make sure you didn’t know who you were until the time was at its most advantageous.”

“For Damian to use me to take down Drogomor? I know that now. But he wouldn’t have known about Tasia then. He couldn’t have.”

“Tasia was always too much for her pack. Too powerful. They tried to subdue her, to make her fall in line. Control her powers to their own gain. She sought out Lycenna as a girl, connecting with Alpha Julien through her dreams. That’s how it started, you know. When the rest of the pack lands enjoyed

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their peace time after the war, the people of Lycenna suffered in silence. They are the true descendants of Lycaon and his mate. Not those born of the whore Diana, the Daughters of Artemis. Frauds, that pack. Lycenna knew they wouldn’t find support in the packs that pledged their loyalty to the High Council, or packs that recognized the White Queens as equal leaders. No. They sought out the rulers of the Isles to help bring their prophet home.”

“They see Tasia as a prophet? What does she want?” I al ready knew the answer, but I needed to hear it out loud.

“Lycaon was the rightful heir to his mother’s creation. The son. The Alpha. He should have gotten the stone while his sis ter settled into a life of submission to her own mate. Instead, he was banished. And Tasia holds the powers of Lycaon now. The only one. That is, until Hanna came out of the woodwork. But Hanna is a halfling with a powerless father; her blood is mixed. She is not a true descendant for that reason.”

“This happened thousands of years ago, if it happened at all!” Rowan said sharply, growing annoyed and angry at the mention of his mate.

“It’s happening again now. Don’t you see? Tasia is on a pil grimage to the cradle of our kind. There, she will start the world anew, the world of which Lycaon should have been master-”

"I've heard enough." I licked my lips, looking over my shoulder at Robbie. "Get him out of here."

"And take 'im where?" Robbie looked at me skeptically.

"Anywhere. Somewhere off the castle grounds. Leave him."

"What?" Keaton growled, looking from Hayden to me. "Leave him?"

"Troy's right," Rowan said, nodding at Robbie as Robbie reached down and pulled Hayden from the floor, slinging him over his shoulder. "Don't be seen."

"What the f*ck-" Keaton stepped forward, but I blocked him from finishing what he started with Hayden.

"You can be the one to kill him, I promise you," I said under my breath to Keaton, catching Rowan's gaze.

He nodded shortly. Hayden was useless to use in this current situation. We couldn't kill him in the middle of a gala. We had to let him go.

But Hayden was a stupid and proud man. He would flaunt what he thought was his prowess over the fact that we hadn't killed him. Call us cowards.

He would be easy to find if he stayed in Mirage. And he had just given us the most useful information we currently had about the moonstones and Tasia's true desires.

He would lead us to her.

But for that, we needed Ethan.

Robbie left the room with Hayden. A silence fell over me, Rowan, and Keaton. I could hear Keaton's heart pounding against his ribs, his breath coming in rasps. He turned on his heel, leaving the room.

"We need to talk to my parents," Rowan said softly.

I nodded as I looked down at the bloodstain on the car

70.95%

pet.

Everything seems to be coming to a head now.... This would all be over soon, and either we would find a way to defeat Tasia-or we'd all be dead.

Maeve

"You just let him go?" Dad's voice would have been a boom had it not been for the three infants sleeping on the bed in what used to be Troy's old room, the shared door slightly ajar.

Troy nodded gravely, looking Dad straight in the eyes.

"Why the hell didn't you get me?" Dad was still dressed in a tuxedo, and the party was still going on downstairs despite the hour. It was close to three o'clock in the morning now.

"He wouldn't have talked. It was me he was here for. We have a history."

Troy then explained their past, and my stomach twisted into a knot. It twisted further as Troy and Rowan recounted what had happened in the office space Troy had gathered Rowan, Keaton, and Robbie in to face this man with a sordid past, and a bleaker future.

"So, he's Tasia's henchman?" I asked, feeling slightly ill. Hanna rested her hand on my shoulder, which sent a strange jolt of electricity down the length of my arm.

I looked up at her, picturing for a split second the stones in Dianny, and how it had felt when I touched them.

"Yes," Troy said, "And we're going to use him to find her and end this."

"You two, come with me." Dad pointed at Rowan and Troy and then left our bedroom. The door closed behind him and Hanna and I were left behind.

"What the hell," I murmured, exhausted beyond belief.

"It's almost over, I think." Hanna sat next to me on the edge of the bed, sighing deeply. She was still in her dress from the gala, but her hair was ruffled and makeup slightly smudged.

Hanna and I'd had very few interactions over the past two months or so since I'd been home. But we were connected through a force neither of us understood.

In a lot of aspects, it felt like that of a mate bond... some thing destined, something neither of us could fight.

"It's going to come down to you and me," she said softly into the darkness of the room.

I nodded, grasping her meaning. We were the ones Tasia wanted-and wanted alive. Everyone else was disposable.

"What would you say if... if I said we find her ourselves, if it came down to it?" I asked.

She took my hand. "I feel as though that's the way it's meant to be."

"Then what do we do? How do we convince them to let us act on our own? Mom may be of some help; she is obviously a threat to Tasia."

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Hanna looked at me, deep into my eyes, as if she were searching for something.

L

"We need to know what powers you possess, Maeve. First and foremost."

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Chapter 102: Our World Would End

Troy

Maeve was sleeping soundly beside me, Will and Charlie nestled in her arms. Oliver was asleep on my bare chest, his mouth moving in a suckling motion as

he slept. I rested my hand over his back, closing my eyes for a moment. Oli seemed to melt into me, succumbing to full sleep as the minutes ticked by.

It was not very late, but getting all three boys to sleep was an exhausting undertaking. It was not uncommon that one, or both of us, fell asleep with the boys while we fumbled through their bedtime routine.

I waited a few minutes longer before slowly rising from the bed, careful not to wake any of my sleeping family members. I patted Oli softly on the back while I crossed the room to where their bed was, which was just a twin-sized mattress. with a railing all the way around it, like an oversized crib.

Rowan and I had built it only a few days ago, shortly after the gala. We found that the triplets slept better in the same bed, and I understood why. They had been together since the moment of conception. Who were we to separate them when all they had known was each other?

One by one I carried the boys to bed, laying them down next to each other. Will turned to his side and snuggled into Oli, their tiny noises touching, while Charlie sprawled out in the shape of a starfish, his tiny fingers splayed as he dreamed.

They were beautiful. I didn't know it was capable of loving something so deeply, while also being terrified of that same thing at the same time.

Who would they become? And what would life be like for them when they were my age? I had made a promise when the High Priestess placed the crown of Poldesse on my head that I would help shape a world worthy of not only my sons but my grandchildren, and so on and so forth. That burden, even in its infancy, felt almost impossible to bear.

I left their crib and walked to Maeve's side of the bed, pulling the covers up to her chin and tucking them around her. I wasn't afraid of waking her up. I could beat on a drum next to her head and she wouldn't even stir. She slept through the stirrings of the boys as well, and because my sleep was of ten paper-thin, I was the one awake in the dead of night when the boys woke up, and I didn't mind it at all.

Rocking them back to sleep in the rocking chair near the window made me feel as though I was back on the Perse phone, slowly lulled to sleep by the soft pitch of the boat.

I knew I had at least an hour or so to myself now that everyone was asleep.

I could've slid into bed beside Maeve, but I was wide awake. I decided to go down to the library and sit beneath the mural for a moment and enjoy the solitude.

But I found myself sharing that solitude with Ethan.

Three days had passed since the gala. Three days of trying to convince Ethan that Hayden wasn't a threat, just a menace. Three days, and no word of Tasia's whereabouts or plans.

We had been busy, however, with the boys and making plans for the future. Maeve and I would need to leave for Poldesse, and soon, to start our new life. But Maeve was refusing to leave on the grounds that the moonstone business was unfinished, and I agreed with her.

But for now, we all felt entirely stuck in place, not sure of what to do next, and what to expect.

Ethan was sitting near the hearth, an untouched glass of fine scotch sitting on the side table as he looked down at a letter in his hands. He hadn't noticed me come in, so I walked loudly across the stone floor, trying not to scare him as I came into the light of the hearth.

I had pulled on a cozy knit sweater and socks before coming down to the library to fight the wet chill in the air and was thankful to find that Ethan had already created a warm, cozy space within the confines of the massive library.

"I was wondering if I'd see you tonight," he said as he closed his book and leaned back in his chair, looking thoughtful.

"What am I in trouble for this time?" I sank into the couch and chuckled to myself, remembering the night Maeve and I had spent here after the social, when I had been beaten to a pulp.

I felt my cheeks go red as I remembered the second night we had spent in the library, which had been a lot less innocent, and tried to hide my blush before Ethan saw.

I wondered briefly if now was the time I was going to get punished for allowing Hayden to get away. So far, Ethan had only been angry he hadn't had a chance to talk to the man

himself.

"I have something for you. Here-" Ethan reached into the pocket of the thick cardigan-like sweater he was wearing and tossed me a package. It was small, wrapped in brown paper, with a note scribbled in an illegible scrawl.

"It's Charles' journal. From the tomb. I had a guy in Mirage separate the pages. It took him a while, but he got it done, says it's still in good shape."

"Did he... read any of it?" I said stupidly, knowing full well Ethan wouldn't have just given the journal to anyone.

"No. I paid him triple to keep his mouth shut in the event he saw something he shouldn't have." Ethan settled back in his seat, opening his book again.

Ethan seemed uninterested in speaking further. I leaned against the couch cushions and quietly unwrapped the paper, looking down at the three-hundred-year-old journal with in

terest.

I had read snippets of it, mostly the end that detailed Charles' journey through the pass and the discovery of the tomb. The beginning of the journal was frayed and the pages had been stuck together, too fragile for me to pull apart.

But now the entire journal was readable, the man who had repaired had sewn a new spine. I could now flip through it in its entirety with ease but still needed to be careful not to tear the fragile paper.

I read it from the beginning at first but found it mostly about his family life. Skipping forward, I began to unravel the story of how Charles ended up on such a quest to begin with,

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Lv 1

which started with a summons from Alpha King Hector of Val oria.

A Priestess had come from the North one day, demanding an audience with the King. The Priestess, Onya, had brought two maids with her, and her daughter, a young woman named Alouette.

Alouette was a beautiful woman, and the Alpha King was immediately taken with her. But Onya refused to give her daughter to the king, stating Alouette would be the next White Queen and was not ready to marry.

The king was devastated and considered taking Alouette by force, but he soon realized he could barter with the Priestess, who was actually the White Queen of the North.

The White Queen was looking for a relic that had been stolen from their temple. A great flood had washed their village, and during the frantic process of trying to save what they could from their ancient temple, a gemstone had been picked from the statue of the Moon Goddess that they worshiped.

The White Queen had been frantically looking for the stone for decades and had heard the king had an explorer in his court who she wanted to hire to find the stone, since she was unable to travel much further south without leaving her pack alone to fend for themselves.

King Hector made her a deal. He would let her use his explorer, a man named Casimir, in exchange for Alouette's hand in marriage. Onya took it one step further, saying that he could have Alouette as his wife and Luna if his explorer returned from his journey with the gemstone she sought.

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An agreement was made, and Onya produced a map, which would lead Casimir to what she said was an ancient territory, long forgotten by the pack lands.

Charles had worked for the King for many years at that point and was immediately summoned to assist the royal explorer Casimir in his quest. Why Onya believed the missing relic was in the Southern Pass, they did not even ask. They just went.

But something interesting had happened before the quest began. I read over Charles' words several times to make sure I was interpreting them correctly. I stood, which caused Ethan to look up from his book, his brow furrowed in concern.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, but I shook my head, beginning to pace as I read aloud.

“I went to the castle at the behest of King Hector for a casual supper. A fortnight were we from a journey that seemed like it would be endless, and I feared the length in which I would be separated from my family. King Hector was a kind man, however. He invited not only myself but also my family, so I arrived at the castle with Mary and Callum, whose twenty-third birthday we had celebrated only the day before.

“The king raised a toast to my son in well wishes for his twenty-third year. But that is when I noticed Callum’s odd behavior. He was locked in a gaze with the fair Alouette, who looked just as shocked as Callum did. I knew that look, the same I often give my dear wife. Can it truly be that they are mates?” I looked up from the journal, catching Ethan’s interested gaze.

“Go on,” he urged.

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“I returned to the village with my family and hurried them into the house. Mary and I knew we could say nothing about the mate bond in front of the king, who had been treating Alouette as his betrothed. On explanation, Callum seemed forlorn but understood the dangers. Who was he to go against the king and pursue a woman with ties to Our Majesty, and Alpha? Even if she was, in fact, his mate.”

I had an awful feeling about this as I flipped the page, stealing a glance at Ethan.

“Onya came to our home a week later. She told us Alouette was with child, and that child was Callum’s, and it would be a daughter. We argued about it, but Callum admitted to his being intimate with Alouette. How Onya and Alouette knew of the pregnancy so soon was impossible to us. But Onya spoke of a prophecy, that the missing relic must be found and restored to its rightful people. If not, she said, the ancient packs lurking in seclusion would wage war, and everything we knew would be gone. If the relic fell into the wrong hands, it would all be over. She needed the relic before the winter solstice and was frantic in her seriousness on the timeline. She was fearful.

“I didn’t understand her. We asked her to leave, fearing King Hector would find out about his betrothed’s deception and retaliate against our family. But

she was firm, saying our world would end on the full moon of Winter Solstice in three hundred years if the relic was not returned to the White Queen. I found this mystic hard to believe, myself a man of intellect. Plus, the White Queens were rumored to be witches and were no longer recognized by the Church of the Moon Goddess-

I flipped the page and found it blank. The next page had been torn from the journal, as if whatever had been written

was not something Charles wanted anyone to know. I slowly closed the journal, my fingers lingering on the worn leather

cover.

"When was this written?" Ethan said as he stared up at me, an unreadable expression crossing over his features.

"Three hundred years ago," I replied, swallowing against the words. A prickle of adrenaline rippled over my skin as I gently set the journal on a side table, sinking back down on the couch. "The White Queens have the moonstones again. So... all must be well."

"You don't believe that, do you?" Ethan reached and clasped his glass of Scotch, bringing the amber liquid to his lips.

"Something doesn't feel right about this at all. Charles found the moonstone after he was already shut into the tomb. We know nothing about what happened to Casimir or this King Hector guy after that. Obviously, Alouette survived. These are... likely relatives of Rosalie, right? There was no break in the White Queen line?"

"Not that I know of, but Rosalie may know for sure. There's a rectory in Mirage. It would have information about the past Alphas and Kings of Valoria. If Alouette became Luna of Valoria and had a child, it would be public information-

"I'll go tomorrow," I said quickly, interrupting him. My mind was moving a million miles an hour. "When is... when is the Winter Solstice?"

Ethan blinked, then furrowed his brow. "A week from now, I believe. On the twenty-first."

I exhaled, my chest tightening so abruptly that I had a hard time taking a new breath.

“Tasia is going to strike on the solstice, Alpha Ethan. We need to be prepared. That has to be what this... what Onya meant. It could be nothing else.”

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Previous Chapter

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Chapter 103: Betrayal

Lv.1

The rectory rose above the University of Mirage, perched atop a hill adjacent to the magnificent Temple of the Moon Goddess, which signified the place as not only a religious sanctuary, but the true capital of both Valoria and the Church.

Mom was keeping in step with me as we followed Troy up the paved pathway leading up the hill. She sighed deeply, picking at a loose thread on her blue chunky-knit sweater.

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She was upset about something. I believed wholeheartedly it had to do with the fact we were all sitting ducks while Tasia hid somewhere nearby, waiting to strike.

“Did you know the White Queens split with the Church of the Moon Goddess?” I asked as we continued what felt like a

slow, endless climb towards the rectory.

“Yes, I did. That ended with my reign, however. We established new ties with the Church shortly after you were born.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Mom laughed, shaking her head. “Oh, sweetheart, I did. It was taught in school. You just never listened.”

I frowned, tucking a loose lock of hair behind my ear. “I did listen-”

“Not often enough,” she teased, giving me a knowing smile.

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I had a feeling karma for being a total pain in my parents’ ass was going to catch up to me as the years went by. I could already see the gleam of mischief in the eyes of Oli and Will. Charlie was our angel, at least for now.

“Troy, why didn’t Dad want to come with us today?” I asked as we neared the rectory.

Troy turned to us, meaning to part with us and go to the rectory himself while we met with the High Priestess of the Church.

“He and Rowan are putting a force together to find Hayden and Carl. I’m meeting up with them later and then—” he paused, looking from me to Mom. “I’m going to be going with your dad to locate them-and Ta’sia.”

“What?” I roared, which startled several people minding their own business as they sat on the benches along the path way.

“We can talk about it later, Maeve,” he said with force, and in front of Mom, too.

I felt heat prickle across my cheeks, running my tongue along my lower lip as I thought of a retort, but Mom took my hand and began to lead me away toward the temple.

“We’re already late, honey-”

“You’re not going ANYWHERE until we have a chance to talk about this, Troy!” I said over my shoulder, giving him my best “mom look” that I had been practicing in the mirror the past few days.

Troy was oblivious to it and seemed heavily distracted. He

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had barely said a word to me about the stranger who had come to the gala. He had barely explained what he had found in the journal last night, too. Both he and Dad were being exceedingly secretive.

He turned toward the rectory without saying a word, and I turned my head back to the temple, vexed beyond a responsible doubt.

“I’m willing to assume the Priestess will need to speak to me more than she needs to speak with you, honey. You can join him after we show both of our faces, at least.”

“Hopefully, there’s a darkened corner where I can ring his

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“You’re being too hard on him.”

neck-”

“Am I? You may be okay with Dad being distant and secretive, but I’m not okay with Troy being that way.”

I didn’t mean the words to be as harsh as they sounded. I could tell they had hurt her. She didn’t reply, the silence louder than her words would have been.

“I’m sorry, Mama.”

“It’s alright. I understand why you’re upset.”

“How do you do it? Be married to a man who-who does things, alone? Without-”

“Without telling me all of his schemes? It’s a lifelong practice, honey. But I trust your father. Just like I hope you will trust Troy’s judgment here. We may be White Queens, but they are men. And we have to let them be like that some

times.”

I considered her response as we walked up the steps to the temple and entered the sanctuary.

The High Priestess's name was Grace, which I found rather ironic. She walked with grace, and talked with grace, but her words were often harsh and sharpened to such an edge I felt as though they could cut me.

Her disdain for Mom and me was obvious. Maybe those ties Mom was talking about hadn't been met with as much support as I had originally thought.

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Grace was taking us on a tour of the temple, which felt wholly unnecessary, especially as she explained certain rites and ceremonies we were already familiar with. Mom seemed to grow in annoyance as I glanced at her, her arms folded over her chest as Grace went over the Church's use of a moon dial in the center of the temple.

"What's your problem with us?" I said, done with Grace's superiority.

Grace seemed unbothered by my question, and answered casually, "You're pagans, for one."

"We worship the same Goddess, Priestess," Mom said shortly. "We have the same rites, the same texts. I believe your attitude has more to do with the fact the White Queens are an extension of the Goddess herself—"

"Like I said, pagans. Witches, if I can be frank."

I was shocked at this woman's tone toward my mom. I didn't even know how to respond.

Lv.1

But Mom didn't lash out. She stood calmly, peering at Grace with skepticism.

"Let's get to what we're here for, shall we? As much as I appreciate your gracious tour, I am more interested in what you want to know about the moonstone. Such a pagan thing, I would say, for you to even know about—"

Mom was cut off by Grace, who had balled her hands into fists.

Grace had gray-blond hair that was pulled back into a tight bun at the nape of her neck. She was taller than Mom but not taller than me, and I had to look

down at her slightly as she spoke. She looked all business in her white and silver robes.

“It belongs to the Church. I need it returned to us at once.”

“You’re mistaken, Priestess,” Mom said, reaching down to tap her finger on the moon dial. “The moonstone belongs to the White Queens. It always has, and ALWAYS will.”

Mom truly turned into a diamond under pressure. I was thankful to have her back to her full health. She seemed to glow in the light coming through the glass ceiling of the cathedral, her eyes glistening with challenge as she waited for Grace’s response.

I took notice of Mom’s use of the moonstones as singular, which matched Grace’s response. She had no idea there were multiple pieces.

I felt a ripple of unease creep over my skin as I watched Grace stare Mom down, her face perfectly expressionless.

“You don’t have it, do you?”

“Not anymore,” Mom lied, her tone soft and casual.

I steeled my own expression, hoping the flush prickling across my cheeks didn’t give anything away. I couldn’t lie to save my life.

“Then where is it?”

“May I ask why it is so important to the Church to have it in their possession?”

Grace ran her tongue along her lower lip, looking thoroughly irked by the question.

“The Church has rights to all the relics related to the Moon Goddess, regardless of whose possession they are in. Including yours.”

“Is that why you aided Damian in the overthrow of Drogo mor?”

I almost fainted. I fought as hard as I could to stay upright as Mom stared blankly at Grace, tilting her head to the side as Grace’s face underwent a great transformation.

“I don’t know what you’re-”

“How else would Romero have gotten the map? You said it yourself. The Church lays claim to all artifacts related to the Moon Goddess.”

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Grace swallowed, then began to back away from the moon dial. Mom followed.

“Who are you working with? Is it Tasia?”

Grace turned as white as her robes when Mom said Tasia’s name. She looked around, suddenly frantic.

“Do not speak her name here-”

“Why? Will she hear us? Is this where you’re hiding her?”

“She is the Moon Goddess, Queen Maeve. You must understand-”

“No,” Mom said firmly. “She is not the Moon Goddess. She is a misled girl with a vendetta about something that happened thousands of years ago. She is a girl with powers she doesn’t understand and powers she refuses to use for good. Had the Church not tempted Damian with the map, had they not given it to Romero for safe keeping during the war-going against their own allies-none of this would be happening.”

“Mom, how do you know all of this?”

Grace was sickly pale, her eyes wide. She had come into this trying to wear us down, and Mom had been in on her grand scheme the entire time. Grace was the High Priestess. She was part of the High Elder Council. She was the head of the Church. How could this possibly be?

“Where is she?” Mom bit out, anger bringing color to her cheeks.

Grace ran for it, her robes trailing behind her as she turned into a darkened hallway, leaving us alone in the grand marble foyer of the temple.

“What the hell was that all about?” I hissed, my voice echoing on the walls despite my attempt to whisper.

Mom looked pleased with herself, exhaling deeply. “Nothing, honestly. I was guessing, throwing things until they stuck, so to speak. I found it odd that Damian’s forces left the Temple untouched during their invasion, while they wrecked practically everything else. It was especially odd that she told you she knew about the moonstone, and that we had it, given the fact that the Church forbids belief in ancient magic.”

“Well, you hit the nail on the head.”

She was walking toward the entrance now. I followed, looking over my shoulder at the corridor where Grace had fled.

“But how did you know she’s harboring Tasia?” I asked as we stepped outside, the bitter chill of the air biting against my cheeks as we walked across the large, ornate garden toward the rectory.

I noticed the difference between the two buildings now that Mom had mentioned something about the Temple being untouched. The rectory had scaffolding along its outer walls, and new stained-glass windows had been installed. It was a mess, compared to the temple.

“I don’t, but now I can tell your father I all but confirmed Tasia is in Valoria. In Mirage, most likely.”

I sucked in my breath, her nonchalant attitude toward Troy and Dad’s plan to go off and finish things without us making much more sense now.

“Some things are just easier when handled diplomatically,

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you know. But that’s not the way of our men, is it?” She smiled, looking at me over her shoulder as we entered the rec

tory.

“This is feeling less and less like a family matter, Mom,” I grunted as I stepped through the arched doorway, finding myself in the center of a massive... library?

It was not what I was expecting. The walls were lined with shelves that spanned four stories, maybe more. A domed ceiling similar to that of the

library at the castle but much larger hung over our heads, with a large chandelier at its center.

“I thought... I thought this was the rectory for the Church? Where the priestesses lived?”

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“Long ago, maybe. Now it’s where they keep their records and the records of the Alphas and Beta who rule in Valoria. It belongs to the university now.” Mom looked around, looking cheerful, whereas I felt like things were starting to really un

ravel.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Troy said tiredly as he ran his fingers through his hair, blinking several times as he continued to look down at a massive leather – bound book, its pages yellowed and fraying with age.

Mom nodded, her legs crossed as she leaned back into a high-backed chair in the private reading room we had acquired, looking terribly smug. “Well, what now? You know the High Priestess will flee-”

“And so what if she does? I am willing to bet she is the least of our problems. Grace has been a pain in the ass since I

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first met her. She believes she is the leader of the Council,

when it doesn’t work that way. Corruption in the Church has been going on for centuries, Troy. She was after wealth, plain as day. It’s likely the Church had no interest in the moon stones and more interest in the other items in the tomb of Ly caon, which was likely promised by Damian if they aided in the invasion.”

“So you really don’t believe she even knows where Tasia is?” I quipped, trying not to fidget in my chair.

“I believe she knows Tasia is here, in Valoria. But Hayden has already confirmed that, has he not? The Priestess needed to go, Maeve. It was

something your father and I have discussed at length, and what happened at the gala only confirmed that our suspicions about her are correct.”

“So all of this, everything that’s happened since the invasion, has been about nothing but greed?” I was dumbfounded and righteously angry.

“And power,” Troy huffed, flipping a page of the book. “Don’t forget that.”

“What exactly does she think she can do with the stones? She’s not a White Queen, and you need the blood of a White Queen to use them! Plus, we already brought them together, and all that happened was Mom got her powers back -” I paused, swallowing against the dryness in my mouth as I fired off my words in rapid succession. “Sorry, Mama. That was a huge deal and I’m happy you’re back, but anyway-”

“That’s the thing Maeve; we don’t know. We only know what Una told us, and so far, only a fraction of her interpretations have been correct. Tasia even said the prophecy stated

the twenty-first White Queen would bring the stones together and bring the Moon Goddess back home, into our realm. Did she not? You, Rosalie, brought the stones together. It was a joint effort. You’re the nineteenth White Queen, and Maeve is the twentieth. Whatever was prophesied to happen, didn’t happen.” Troy was visibly frustrated.

I felt like going to him, but something stopped me.

“I do believe, however, that Tasia plans on killing all of us, except for you.” Troy leaned back in his chair, looking nothing but defeated.

“What makes me so special?”

“I think it has something to do with your connection with Hanna,” Mom said sadly, running her hands over her jeans. “You can speak to Duck, too. None of us can. You haven’t tested your wolf powers yet, so we don’t know if you can do anything the rest of us can’t do.”

“We need to do that, soon,” Troy turned back to his book.

“Well, sorry to disappoint everyone. I’ve been a little preoccupied with a litter of newborn boys!” I was sick of this. All of it. The uncertainty, the mess and danger it was creating for my family.

“That’s not what I meant, Maeve-”

“Then what exactly did you mean?” I bit out, not caring that my mom was witnessing our fight. Troy looked at me with a heavy gaze, his brow knitted in sorrow.

“You’re the key, remember? It’s come up several times. You matter in this, for whatever reason. Tasia needs some

thing from you. I just don’t know what.”

He looked away from me, flipping another page. Then his demeanor changed abruptly, his shoulders going rigid as he bent over the book, his finger gliding down the page until it stopped.

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 324

Chapter 104: The White Wolf

“Look, this line, right here-” Mom and I were standing behind Troy, leaning over his shoulders to peer down at the neat, faded scrawl just above his finger.”

“What does it say? I can barely see the ink!” I narrowed my eyes, wishing the rectory had more than archaic candles to light the dim room.

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“King Hector-his name is right here. He was the king mentioned by Charles in his journal. Look, he did in fact marry Alouette... and they had a son.”

Mom was silent as she scanned the page, her brow fur

rowed in confusion.

“That means there was a break in White Queen line at some point, right? Can that... can that happen?”

“Your family believes it can,” Mom broke in, looking confused, like she was thinking of some long-forgotten memory or conversation. “He told me once that if Rowan had a daughter, she would be in line to my throne. It was a discussion we had before you were born, Maeve. Before we knew you were a

irl”

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“But would... say a female cousin of a White Queen hold the same powers as the White Queen herself? There’s no mention of Onya, the White Queen in Charles’s journal, having any other children.” Troy turned to face Mom.

“Perhaps, but I’m not totally certain. There are no texts on this, you know. All there was... was the names of the queens etched into the temple in Winter Forest. That wall was destroyed. We might never know who the Queen after Onya was, whether Aloutette became the Queen after her mother, or if it was someone else. There is the library in the castle in Winter Forest, but I’ve never seen any text in there that discussed this.”

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“So if I don’t have a daughter, Rowan could? And she could rule?” A strange glimmer of hope tightening around my heart. How close I had come to death for my sons... I knew in my heart I could not sacrifice myself just so the pack lands could have another White Queen.

Suddenly Troy jumped up, nearly knocking both me and Mom to the ground. He was pale, frozen in place for a moment before he turned to us, fear etched into every curve, every line of his face.

“Oh, Goddess,” he breathed, the words meant for no one but himself. He slowly looked at me, sheer pain flashing behind his eyes.

“Troy, what is wrong? Are you hurt?” Mom had her hands on his arms, trying to get him to look her in the eyes, but he

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couldn’t.

Lv.1

“Rosalie,” he said, looking past the both of us at the far wall. “Please don’t take offense to what I am about to say. But I must know. I have to know if

Rowan and Hanna have been intimate. Have they-is there any way at all that Hanna could be pregnant?"

I gaped at him, then at Mom, who looked just as shocked as I was.

"I assume so, Troy. They're mates for Goddesses sake!"

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"We need to go to them, right now. Hanna she-oh, how did I not realize this before?!"

"What the hell is wrong with you!" I shook him hard, damn near ready to smack him to get him to snap back to reality before his gaze finally left the far wall and settled on me.

"The tomb. There were inscriptions... carvings everywhere. I didn't think... I could read it. I had seen it before. On the map, I was sure. But I didn't understand what it meant until right now, this very moment."

"What?" Mom was shaking her head, anxiety creeping into her voice.

"That crazy old woman was right, Rosalie. About Hanna. The moonstones, they weren't-we did bring the Moon God

back. She just... she hasn't been born yet. She will be the twenty-first White Queen. Rowan and Hanna's daughter."

"But," I stammered, at a loss for rational thought, "what does that have to do with Onya, and Alouette?"

"Nothing. At least I thought nothing. But... the expedition the king sent out to retrieve the moonstone in order for Onya to allow Alouette to marry King Hector came back without it... which means he either married her by force, or Onya allowed it... but-"

"That would have caused a break in the White Queen line," I mumbled, seeing the big picture.

"Exactly," Troy breathed, running his fingers through his

hair.

“Ethan mentioned something like this to Rowan, long ago, when Maeve first arrived in Mirage to rule alongside Ernest,” Rosalie said softly, sitting down. “He said Rowan could rule over Winter Forest in the future if he had a daughter. I argued that wasn’t how it works, that the powers had to be direct... through a daughter of the queen.”

“Do you think Tasia destroyed the Temple so we couldn’t figure this out?” I asked in a soft tone, my head beginning to pound.

“Possibly. We might not ever know. I don’t plan on asking

her,” Troy said firmly, closing the book and walking away from the dusty desk, tapping his finger on his lip as he paced.

“She’s getting ready to rid the world of the White Queens. She destroyed the temple. She’s going to take the stones and kill Hanna. That’s what we know, and all we need to know. It’s time to finish this.” Mom rose from her chair and left the room.

Troy

Rowan and I were standing on the terrace outside of the atrium, overlooking the fields of long, brittle yellow grass. Hanna and Maeve were standing in the field talking to each other, too far enough from where we stood to be heard.

A heavy blanket of fog was rolling around their legs, whispering through the grass. The sky was gray, thick with moisture, and smelled like rain.

Inside the castle, Rosalie and Ethan, as well as the other “elders” of the family, such as Talon, Georgia, Vicky, and Paul, were holding a conference with Eugene of Red Lakes. It was likely Ethan was telling him exactly what was going on, and how his family was connected. I felt my stomach tighten, knowing how close we were to battle. But I could barely wrap my head around what the battle would possibly look like.

The castle was already heavily guarded by warriors. I could

see them walking through the fog along the perimeter of the castle’s grounds, little specks of black in the distance.

My gaze settled back on Hanna and Maeve.

“Is she pregnant?” I asked Rowan.

Rowan gave me a dirty look, then settled, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I don’t know. It only happened once.”

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“Once is enough,” I grunted, leaning on the terrace, “or twice.”

“You don’t really believe what that crazy old woman from Lycenna said, do you? That Hanna is going to the mother of the Moon Goddess? It’s insane, Troy. I don’t believe it for a second.”

Duck was running through the grasses in a wide circle, his tongue lolling. Pete and Kacidra had arrived only an hour ago, bringing the dog with them.

He playfully lunged at Maeve, who threw a stick far into the field, and he took off like a dart once again.

“I didn’t at first. But I-I believe it now.”

A long silence flooded the distance between me and

Rowan, filling with the sounds of thunder in the distance and the crinkle of the grasses as a breeze rippled through it. Tasia could move the air, and every time a gust of wind rattled the windows of the castle, I thought it was her.

But I was just paranoid.

“You both need to stay on the castle grounds. Do you hear me?” Rowan shouted in a fatherly tone, which made Maeve turn her head sharply in our direction to glare.

“Shut up, Rowan!” she shouted back, turning away from us to make a face at Hanna, who laughed.

“We should go with them,” I said, tapping my fingers on the terrace, “I don’t like the idea of them out there, just the two of them. Not with them being the target of Tasia’s—”

“I know,” Rowan said hastily, pursing his lips.

“I know your Dad is going to want us to come to talk to the family soon, fill us in on the plan, but...”

We looked at each other for a moment, then began to shed our clothing down to our boxers.

“No,” Maeve said with conviction as we walked toward them, crunching through the grass. “I don’t want your help or criticism.”

“We’ve all been able to shift for years now, Maeve. This is your first time.” Rowan shifted without another word, shaking out his coat and sending a sprinkle of damp over the rest of us who were still standing.

I shrugged my shoulders at Maeve, who looked more *ner vous* than upset, and shifted myself. Her eyes went wide, and I realized the only time she had seen me as a wolf had been for a split second before Damian had brought the tunnel of the

tomb over me.

Hanna turned to Maeve, leaning to whisper in her ear. Maeve hugged her body with her arms, shaking her head.

‘You’ll be fine. Just think about it. Dig deep. You can mind – link. You can feel me as your mate. Your wolf is there; you just have to find her,’ I said over the mind-link.

She looked at me, panic flashing through her eyes. “What if I can’t do it? I don’t-I don’t feel it!” she said aloud, turning

from me to Hanna.

Hanna put a hand on Maeve’s shoulder, nodding in en

couragement.

I heard a surprised yelp and turned my head to see Rowan running in the opposite direction of us. My ruff prickled to at tention, thinking there was some threat.

But then Duck burst from the tall grass, his feet barely

Lv.1

touching the ground as he ran from Rowan, who was chasing him.

“Stop! You’re going to scare him!” Maeve cried, but neither Rowan nor Duck seemed to be negatively affected by the game.

Duck rounded on Rowan, playfully baring his teeth, and then pounced on him. Rowan played dead for a moment, pre tending to whimper as Duck tried to yank him around by the thick fur of his neck. Duck climbed on top of Rowan, barking in triumph.

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The little game between Rowan and the dog seemed to put Maeve at ease. I could tell she wanted to play, too.

‘I’m getting one of these,’ Rowan said over the mind-link as he shook Duck off of him, clacking his teeth at the dog to stop any further attacks.

“Come on, babe. It’s time. You have to try,” I coaxed, slid

ing my boxers over my legs.

Hanna looked away, her cheeks pinkening. I shifted and stretched, groaning in pleasure. It had been weeks since I was able to do this, and running the castle grounds had been one of my favorite pastimes last summer when I was pretending to be the breeder.

Hanna nodded at Maeve and then let her robe fall onto

the ground. She shifted, and I felt the breath catch in my throat. Rowan turned to her, his head tilting to the side in sur

prise.

Hanna was a black wolf with deep cinnamon eyes. She was small and lean, which was expected based on her figure in her basic form. But there was a band of white around her neck, and little patches of white and silver along her back. I had nev er seen a wolf with such markings. Rowan seemed very

shocked.

'Your coat....' he said.

Hanna spun to see the white on her back. 'It wasn't like this before-'

Maeve had dropped to her knees, clutching *her* stomach.

'Maeve, you're okay. Sometimes – sometimes it's a little painful, the first time. But mostly it just feels different, new, it's fine-' I said through the mind-link, watching as she bent in the grass, falling to her knees.

The grass enveloped her, hiding her from view. A few seconds went by in the silence, the three of us waiting for Maeve to move, to shift, to do anything.

Hanna backed up, her ruff standing on edge as a wolf emerged from the grass.

She had done it. She had shifted. But our congratulations were marred by what we saw.

Maeve looked up at us, her wolf eyes just as blue as her own. She was beautiful, large, and powerful.

And totally, completely, white.

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 325

Chapter 105: Why is Her Fur White?

Ethan

Lv 1

I had known Lynus since the end of war. He had been much younger when we met **for** the first time, of course, shortly after he was elected by the people of the Isles to represent them on the newly formed council of the High Elders. He

was fifteen years older than me but was the youngest among the "Elders." He'd been a strong man in his early forties when

he was elected, but that was almost twenty–seven years ago

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Lynus was stepping down from his council seat, which was meant to be a life-long position, to be Troy's advisor. The council was not only losing Lynus, who had been a longtime voice of reason among the other elders, but also the High Priestess, who my wife had sniffed out as a traitor to not only Valoria, but the pack lands in general.

What a mess.

"An election for the council seat will be held in a year at the most, after the regional elections end. Likely, three candidates will be running for the council seat; one from Papeno, one from Avondale, and one from Suntra." Lynus was sitting straight as a rod on the couch across from me in the modest sized office that was used by the Alpha of Drogomor for official business.

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Me, Lynus, Alpha Eugene of Red Lakes, and Captain Keaton, the new Beta of Poldesse.

Keaton was glaring at me like usual, his issue with authority etched into his face. He only trusted Troy, his mate Myla, and his own reflection in the mirror, but I currently needed him. I had just spent the better part of an hour explaining the Tasia situation to Eugene and Lynus. Keaton was one of the few people currently in the castle who had been there to witness not only the journey to find one half of the moonstone, but also the fall of Dianny.

"You'll be acting as both Troy's advisor and the High Elder of the Isles in the meantime," I breathed, settling back against the couch. "I'll need you to help

explain the situation in full to the council when the time comes, especially in terms of the Priestess situation.”

“I understand. I have no problem with that,” Lynus answered, nodding as he broke my gaze and turned his attention

of Lv.1

to the fire for a moment, the silence that settled between us broken by the soft sound of the piano being played in the library down the hall.

“Who is the High Priestess of the Church, now that that high and mighty Gracie broad is on the run?” Eugene asked. Despite everything I had just told him, Eugene seemed totally and completely relaxed. He was sipping a glass of wine, his legs crossed, with a rosy glow to his cheeks.

“A woman named Tempest. She’s younger, I was told. But she has taken issue with the corruption within the Church for many years. I believe she will push for change in a way that’s beneficial for the pack lands,” Lynus replied.

“And what’s her runner-up’s name? Chastity?” Eugene snorted with mirth, the reply eliciting a soft, secret smile from Keaton.

“Those aren’t their given names. But yes, I believe Chastity is the runner up.” I couldn’t help but smile at myself. I enjoyed Eugene’s company. He was a strange man, but he was honest and forthright. I’d never known him to not speak his mind, regardless of the company or situation.

“It’s Keaton’s role as **Beta to** help oversee the election in the Isles, unbiased, **of** course,” Lynus motioned toward

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“If we make **it** that **far, you** mean,” Keaton interjected,

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Who knew what the next week was going to *look* like?

“Captain Keaton is right,” Eugene said, leaning forward. “We should consider moving the Alphas and heirs to remote locations, until we know what this Tasia lady and her cronies are going to do.”

Lynus turned to me, nodding in agreement. I bristled.

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“How, exactly? We have three Alphas currently in residence at the castle, including myself. My wife is a White Queen, my daughter her heir-”

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“And my daughters,” Eugene cut in, sipping from his wine. He had already sent his son Aaron back to the west to spend some time in Breles before they were both set to return to Red Lakes.

“Not a good idea, in my humble opinion,” Keaton interjected, looking around the circle. “That’s exactly what Tasia wants, you know, for us to split up.”

“And how do you know that?” I asked.

“Fewer people around to protect what she really wants. Your wife and daughter, and her son’s mate. Right? And what are you going to do, put us all in safe houses around Mirage guarded by warriors day in and day out? People expect the castle to remain guarded, but the cottages and apartment buildings... we’d stick out anyway, more than we do now.”

Keaton was right. I looked at Lynus, who surrendered, shrugging his shoulders.

The office door opened, and Maeve stepped in, excitement etched into every curve and line of her face.

“We’re going now,” she panted, her eyes creasing with anticipation.

“Don’t leave the grounds,” I said sternly.

“Mom and Gemma have the boys. We’ll be back before dinner!” Maeve was gone as quickly as she had come, and once again the office was blanketed in uncomfortable silence. Lynus and Eugene were staring at me expectantly, waiting for an explanation.

“Maeve is going to shift for the first time. Troy and Rowan will be with her.”

“Do you think that’s wise, under the circumstances?” Eugene **set** his empty wine glass on the coffee table, looking up at me through his pale lashes.

“She needs **to** know how **to use** her **wolf**. Anyway, like mentioned by Keaton, the grounds **are** heavily guarded.” I flexed my **jaw** to tease **the** tension caused by my words. I was uncomfortable with it, **of course**. But **I** believed them to be safe, and this was something Maeve was ready to do. She **was** of age. She was strong. And she had lived her **life** believing

Lv. 1

she would never come into her powers. I needed to step back and let her do this on her own.

It was obvious whatever conversation we had been having had died. All talk of business was finished, and Keaton **stood** and took his leave, **to** where I didn't know, but dinner had been planned for later in the evening, and Keaton was expect ed to be there. Lynus and Eugene rose to leave, the two of them walking in opposite directions as they went back to their rooms to rest before dinner.

I closed the door to the office as I stepped out into the hallway, turning my head toward the sound of laughter and music coming from the library. I smiled softly to myself, taking a deep breath as I ran my fingers through my hair.

Everyone was home, everyone was safe. And the only thing I wanted to do now was spend a few moments with my grandsons.

Maeve

I was not prepared.

I **felt** nothing but power as I stepped through the tall grass, lowering my snout to the ground and inhaling deeply. Every smell, every sound, **and** every touch was amplified. I wanted to run, to howl, **to** feel my **fur** brushing against the grasses in a way I could hardly put into words.

These feelings, so overwhelming, momentarily blinded me to the shocked stares of Rowan, Hanna, and **Troy**. I looked up at them, stretching my neck, closing my **eyes** to the breeze tickling my ears.

‘Maeve?’ Troy’s voice sounded like music in my mind. I looked at him, sizing him up, feeling nothing but severe, des perate longing. My mate, my entire body seemed to say. It’s

him, he's mine.

'Goddess, Maeve. What the actual f*ck?' Rowan's voice ruined the moment, and I found myself turning my head sharply in his direction, my lips sliding over my teeth as I let out a low, guttural growl in response.

Then I turned, and darted into the field, running as fast as my four paws could take me.

It wasn't until the harsh commands and desperate calls from the mind-link I shared with the group faded into silence did I stop. I had crested a hill, overlooking the entirety of the castle grounds below. I could see Troy and Rowan moving through the tall grass below me, making their way up the slope. Hanna was lagging behind, moving cautiously.

'Maeve, just wait a minute,' Troy said, his voice edged with concern.

'I can't. I need—I need to run. I can't describe this feeling, Troy. Everything is—everything is so different. So, so perfect.'

'You need to stop. Just—just hang on—' he reached the top of the hill, panting. He was a very, very large wolf. I had always imagined him this way, dark brown fur and a body that moved like a big cat instead of a limber, lean canine. He was pure predator.

And me? Well, I didn't rightfully know. I hadn't even turned my neck to look at my own coloring.

'Maeve, wait
down at my paws.

Troy caught my movement as I looked

I was white, borderline silver in the pale evening moon light. I was the color of the mist that swirled through the grass at the base of the hill. White like the moon. Like the distant stars. I felt a prickle of unease sweep over me, causing my fur to stand on end. I looked up at Troy and silently pleaded for an explanation.

Only White Queens who had summoned the power of the **Moon** Goddess had white fur, to match their white hair.

I was not a White Queen yet. I didn't have the white hair of someone who had summoned the Goddess's powers.

Unless... what Una had said about what I had done in the stone circle was true...

'Oh Goddess, Troy. What have I done?'

'Don't panic,' he said **as** he stepped toward me, placing his forehead against mine for a moment. 'You're fine. Everything's fine.'

'I shouldn't be this color-'

'I don't know why you are. I think we should go back to the castle and talk to **your** mom-'

'No!'

'Troy's right, Maeve! We have to go back!' Rowan was at the top of the hill, slightly labored from the climb.

'No, I don't want to worry her. All I've done is worry every one, constantly!'

'Maeve?' Hanna's voice rang out through my mind, and I turned toward her as she stepped cautiously over the crest of the hill, moving like a dark shadow into the small circle of wolves **we** had created. She was eyeing me with interest and

skepticism,

'Come on, we're going **back**-' Troy tried to cut in, but Hanna cut him off.

'What can you do?' Hanna said, and I was utterly confused by the question.

'What do you mean?' I said desperately, my heart beginning to race.

‘Show us, show us what you can do,’ she replied, glancing at Rowan and Troy with her teeth bared in warning, ‘I want **to see** you run.’

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‘What? Do you think she has some kind of special power?’ Rowan pawed the ground, huffing in Hanna’s direction.

‘I only know **of** one white **wolf**, and that’s your mother. Maeve came into her wolf, and regardless of the shock of her coloring, it’s unhealthy for her not to shift and run her wolf. She’ll be better for it. You know it’s true, Rowan.’ Hanna’s voice in my head seemed slightly annoyed with Rowan and Troy’s anxiousness. Her confidence eased me, and I found myself moving to her side.

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How odd this was. Troy and Rowan were standing in the shadow of the moon. Hanna was breathing slowly next to me, her coat quivering as she took long, easy breaths. We were **so** different in this form, and **it** was shocking, downright unbelievable.

‘Fine,’ Rowan huffed, his teeth gleaming in the **moon**, ‘but only a few loops around the castle grounds, okay? Then **we** need to go see Mom.’

‘We can’t be away that long anyway,’ Troy said, stepping forward. ‘The boys will be wanting you, Maeve.’

‘Okay. Just **a** few minutes then,’ I concurred, then I followed Troy and Rowan down the other side of the hill, which opened up to another wide, rolling field of tall yellow grass. The forest was visible in the distance, the trees nothing but shadows from our vantage point.

I felt a deep, unnatural longing to run toward the trees, to let the darkness embrace me. Why I felt this way, I didn’t know, but as a rush of wind came up behind us, I felt as though it were pushing me forward, begging me to follow my desires.

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 326

Chapter 105: Why is Her Fur White?

Ethan

Lv 1

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Lv.1

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Lv. 1

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Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 327

Chapter 107 : The White-Haired Girl

Maeve

The tunnel system snaked beneath the forest floor on the outskirts of the castle grounds. Most of it was caved in, which is likely how it had stayed hidden for so long. The forest was vast, and even with warriors lining the perimeter of the castle grounds, I felt utterly hidden from the outside world.

We’d followed Carl through the forest for at least a mile. A rocky hill sprouted from the forest floor, strange, gnarled trees growing out of the pockets of earth between the massive, cracked boulders. The earth dropped down as we neared the hill, and the landscape looked as though some kind of explosion had happened there, long ago now. Grass and moss blanketed the area’s scars.

“The men will wake soon,” said a red-eyed man behind us.

I sucked in my breath. Rogues. Rogues with their piercing, red eyes. My mom had told me stories of them.

One of them having been my own father, at one point in time.

What were the Rogues doing mingling with the likes of Tasia?

“Find somewhere to set them down. Hayden will deal with them. Bind their hands and legs, though.” Carl motioned for Hanna and me to stop then walked forward. There was a darkened gap between two boulders, and as he approached, an

other man came out of the darkness, holding a lantern. Carl turned to look at us, at me.

"After you," he said, bowing his head as he motioned us forward into the remains of the tunnel below.

It was cold and damp. I could smell nothing but sulfur and wondered how long these people had been hiding in the tunnel's depths.

Worst of all, I found it impossible to mind-link, even with my close proximity to the castle's inhabitants, which was likely only a few miles away.

I found the reason for this almost immediately as Hanna and I followed Carl into the depths of the long-forgotten tunnels. Lanterns had been hung along the walls by long, rusted nails.

And dangling from the lanterns were raw, red stones, the same stone that lined the valley where Dianny had been nestled.

I swallowed hard, remembering how Una had told me about the significance of the stone, how it prevented the powers of the wolf from taking over. We hadn't been able to mind-link there.

"Shit," I mumbled, glancing at Hanna.

She was looking straight ahead, unblinking. Had Tasia brought them here? She must have. It was the only explanation.

"Come, through here -" Carl ushered us through an old wooden door that was hanging off its hinges. Inside, dim

REAL lantern light lit a wide, circular room of sorts with a shallow ceiling. I felt a ripple of unease as Carl failed to follow us inside, instead placing the broken door over the opening, his footsteps receding as he walked away.

"Hanna," I said softly, "are you okay?"

Before she could answer me, we heard a familiar voice approaching. "I'm sure your knowledge of my involvement in Damian's plot surprised you, Princess. I'm thankful I have the opportunity to explain." A familiar voice echoed from a shadowed section of the room. Hanna was looking at me, her eyes shining with tears.

Tasia walked toward us slowly, taking a moment to look us each up and down. I was shocked by her appearance. She was thin, her once beautiful face lined with fatigue and filth.

Her thick, curly black hair had been cut short and so close to her scalp that the curls were no longer visible.

And most shocking, the warm pride that once shown behind her gray eyes was gone, replaced by mingled grief, despair, and fury.

"Were you always on his side?" I asked, the words thick and heavy.

She looked down at her feet, shaking her head.

"No. Not until...." She looked me in the eye, and I saw nothing but hatred. "I've known Carl longer than Damian. Carl was who introduced me to him... shortly after you left Dianny for the pass. Days, it was. Carl and I share the same gift I share with Hanna. He is weak, of course. These gifts... women are just more able to harness them, more in tune with our spiritu-

ality but... as children, we found each other in the dream realm. He is older, and came into his powers first. He wanted me... wanted a child with me. I didn't understand why until recently."

"Of course, he did," Hanna said shortly, "that's all the Lycennians care about. Breeding, passing on their powers,"

"Then you know of them well, Hanna. I didn't expect as much from a hybrid like yourself. You have no reason to have the powers that you do, you must realize that. Your father comes from nothing, not even royal blood. His wolf is average, at best. Your siblings are average. Your sister doesn't possess a single drop of Lycaon's gifts. Why you, then? I have wondered that for a long time." She tapered off, looking around the room for a moment before settling her gaze back on us.

"Then Carl was working with Dam-" I began, but Tasia cut me off.

"Romero had the map to the tomb the Lycennian's have been searching for, for centuries. A defector stole it from them before traveling to Winter Forest, where he stole Morighan's half of the moonstone, the half belonging to the White Queen. But in his haste to free the stone from the statue of the Goddess, the map fell from his pocket, or so the legend goes. The White

Queen at the time found it and had no choice but to take it to the King of Valoria in hopes he could help her locate the stone before the two halves were combined.”

Onya. It had to be.

“Casimir-” I breathed, and Tasia nodded.

“The only explorer at the time who had ventured south of the Isles and returned to the pack lands in one piece. An ancestor of Romero, and of Troy. The map was believed lost for some time. Casimir didn’t return to Valoria; he hid in the Isles, married, had children. So on, and so forth-”

Troy had told me about the night Romero died, only an hour before all hell broke loose and Damian invaded in search of the map.

“Your parents’ war and the dawn of a new era allowed Lycenna to send scouts into the pack lands to settle, to spy. The map to the tomb was their goal. They knew it was the dawn of the prophecy when Rosalie harnessed the power of the Moonlight Lily. That’s when it all began, you see. Out of the shadows they came, pretending to be a new, eastern pack to gain access to the conventional world in which you live. They spied on Winter Forest, witnessing your brother, Hanna, fall from the tree. They saw you there, watching. They saw you do it.”

I glanced at Hanna, noticing her eyes flash and cheeks flush.

“Hanna, what does she mean?”

“Do you want to tell her, Hanna, or should I?” Tasia paced, tucking her hands behind her back.

Hanna looked down at her feet.

“I didn’t know... I didn’t have control, then. I didn’t mean to hurt him. I still don’t know how I did it,”

“Oh, if I could harness water like you.” Tasia laughed, shaking her head. “You have no idea what you can do, Hanna.

That’s why-”

“Hanna, you caused Aaron to fall from the tree?” | whis pered, unable to stop myself.

She met my eyes, tears sliding down onto her dark lashes, “He was being mean to you. Teasing you. I was mad at him for it. I remember feeling... feeling,”

“Do you mind?” Tasia bellowed. I turned back to Tasia, reaching out to take Hanna’s hand in my own, squeezing gen tly.

Tasia shook her head, laughing.

“Oh, gosh. Would you look at that? At least you’ll have each other in death-”

“Is that what you mean to do? Kill us? Don’t you need my blood to use the stones? Wasn’t that the entire point?” My words were heated and biting.

“Of course. I have to or else the prophecy of the stones cannot come to fruition. I realized that when you stood in the stones, Maeve. You, and my mother, saw your mother hurt, needing your help. The stones were the only way. I saw the end of the White Queens and the pack lands returning to the rightful hands... the followers of Lycaon. He was the true Al pha, the God after his mother.”

“What did Damian have to do with any of this? Why in vade Valoria?” I asked in a trembling voice.

“Carl needed a way to get to the White Queen. Like I said before, they had spies in Winter Forest. Queen Rosalie was too strong to outright attack. But her daughter was not yet in

11 AW her powers... an easy target. Around the time you came to Valoria, Maeve, my life at home was beginning to crumble. Carl was constantly reaching out to me in my dreams. He thought we had the map. I didn’t know about Seraphine until you came to Dianny. I didn’t know we’d had the stone. All i knew was we had a sacred compass, a compass that could lead us home to the land of our origins, the ancient city Ly caon founded in the far reaches of the southern pass.

“When she gave that to you... I snapped. I found Carl in the dream realm and told him what had happened, but he was already two steps ahead of me. He had promised Damian riches beyond belief if Damian found the map to

Lycaon's tomb. How they met, I do not know for sure, only that Damian's hatred for your father spurred his desire to join Carl's cause. Carl tempted him with the moonstones, lying about their power, lying about your importance, Maeve. We just needed you dead. All of the White Queens, and their descendants... SO we could start fresh."

"You killed your own family. Your parents... your siblings. All to stop – to stop a prophecy? To usher in a new era? Of what? *War*? Unrest, crime, and poverty? You killed children, Tasia. You brought an entire valley down over the heads of your young brothers and sisters-" I cried, fighting against the fear washing over me.

"I begged Hanna to join me, didn't I? I tried to reason with her the day I brought down the temple of the White Queens and killed Queen Rosalie. You could've been on the winning side, Hanna. Now you'll die, you both will, and so will your children, Maeve. I know where they are. I know where they were hidden. It's over. And Hanna," she turned her gaze on Hanna, a sinister smile touching her lips, "You've dreamt of her, haven't you? The white-haired girl in the strange temple? You

do know who she is, don't you?"

Hanna paled, her eyes going wide.

"Your daughter. Your child with Rowan. The two lines coming together that last. Her birth is the end of the prophecy. A ruler to guide our kind into a new era of peace and prosperity. But at a major cost to you-"

"Stop," Hanna begged, tears rolling down her cheeks.

"You feel it, don't you? Those visions of the future, that teary eyed girl. You're not there with her, are you? Do you want to know why, Hanna?"

"I don't-please!"

"You won't live to see her grow. You won't be there to protect her. You die, Hanna. And the girl moves on. Rowan moves on. The world goes on without you until you are forgotten entirely, ashes, dust. Nothing. I can offer you more," She moved forward, clutching Hanna by the arm. Hanna tried yanking her arm away but Tasia only tightened her grasp. "Let's go. We have much to discuss."

She pushed Hanna toward the door, and a red – eyed rogue opened it as Tasia dragged Hanna away, leaving me alone.

I stepped toward the door, but the red-eyed man bared his teeth at me, placing the door back over the opening.

My hands weren't bound. No attempt had been made to keep me tied up, kept in one place. I banged on the door, screaming at the top of my lungs.

The door opened again and Troy was tossed into the room, right on top of me. I fell to the ground under his weight.

He had been dressed but was barely lucid, groaning as I rolled him off of me. I looked up to see the dark haired man Troy had acted so strangely toward the night of the ball looming over me, his eyes creased as he smiled down at me.

"This is going to be fun," the man said shortly as he reached down and pulled me upright by the collar of my dress, tearing the fabric.

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 328

Chapter 108: Last Words of the White Queen

Maeve

Hayden paced around the room for a long while, lingering in meditative silence as I watched him. Occasionally, he turned to glance at me but made no further moves to touch me, or Troy.

I was kneeling next to Troy, trying desperately to wake him up. He was struggling to keep his eyes open for more than a few seconds at a time, the effects of the wolfsbane still gripping his body.

I looked around for anything sharp, anything I could cut myself with to give Troy some of my blood, and finally resorted to bringing my hand to my mouth, preparing to bite into the flesh beneath my thumb.

"Uh, no. Don't do that." Hayden was at my side in an instant, knotting his fingers in my hair and pulling sharply. I screeched, which seemed to rouse Troy from his stupor enough to bare his teeth and grimace, his fingers twitching.

“Ah, see? All you had to do was scream to wake him up. Let’s try again.” He pulled my hair so hard, some of it came clean out of my scalp. I grimaced, shaking as I held in the scream threatening to erupt from my mouth.

“Scream!” he demanded, twisting my hair violently until I could help but whimper. Troy moaned, rolling onto his side. “It’s useless. This is no fun.” He tossed me onto the ground, shaking his head as he walked away and began to pace again.

“What do you want?” I winced as I rubbed my head. My hair was already falling out in droves after having the boys, but now I was sure I had a bald spot.

“I’m nothing more than a babysitter right now, I’m afraid. Until it’s your turn.”

“My turn for what?”

“Well, once Tasia finishes up with Hanna, then you’re next. I think she wants to kill you in front of Troy, at least that’s what I hope. And then your parents, of course. I’m sure she’ll have the White Queen watch-”

“My parents?” I stammered. “Are they here?”

“Last I heard, the rogues were battling with some Drogo mor warriors in the forest, so they know you’re nearby. Gosh, Tasia is just so happy she was able to take care of this now, instead of waiting for the solstice.”

Licked my lips, glancing at Troy before meeting Hayden’s eyes again.

“What was she planning to do on the solstice?”

“Well, that is when the stones are at their most powerful. She was going to bleed the two of you dry, you and your mother, that is, and activate the stones to heighten her power enough to bring the entirety of the packlands to the ground.”

I wondered if Hayden was supposed to be telling me any of this. He didn’t seem like the sharpest tool in the shed, that was for sure.

“She doesn’t mean to combine them?” I asked.

“Well, no. She doesn’t want the Moon Goddess to come down and smite her, I guess. I’m not sure how that all works-” he waved his hand in dismissal.

“Smite her?” I couldn’t help but laugh. Having already talked to Tasia, I knew her end goal was to kill us all, take over the pack lands, and end the rule of the White Queens forever, paving the way for those of the Lycaon bloodline to rule.

But she wanted something else from Hanna. That’s why she had her alone.

“What does Hanna have to do with all of this?” I asked, squeezing Troy’s arm. He was starting to stir now, trembling as the effects of the wolfsbane left his system.

“Well, from what I understand, Hanna is either going to give birth to the next White Queen, who has some prophecy about her as well, but I don’t know the specifics, or she’s going to try to turn Hanna to our side. Hanna is very powerful, as you know. More powerful than Tasia from what Carl has said. Carl wants Hanna for himself, so it’s likely he will force Tasia to keep her alive-”

“Shut him up, Maeve. I can’t take one more second-” Troy groaned, a little green around the gills.

“Goodmorning sunshine,” Hayden said mockingly, crouching only a few feet away from us and tilting his head as he peered at Troy.

“Get away from me. From her-”

“I’m on strict orders to keep an eye on you both.” Hayden exhaled, standing. He glanced at me, his mouth pulling into a wide, delirious smile before he kicked Troy right in the center

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of the stomach.

I jumped up and lunged at him, swinging blindly, missing his jaw by a fraction of an inch.

“Oh, a feisty one. You surprise me, Troy. I always thought you’d end up alone, or with Keaton’s sister-”

“F*ck him up, Maeve. For the love of the Goddess-“]

I screamed in frustration as I charged at Hayden, this time landing a punch right in the center of his chest. He staggered backward, stumbling, and caught himself on the wall.

“Now, now. Let’s talk this through-”

I hit him again and again, but he was much larger than me. He had roughly an inch on Troy, although he was not nearly as strong. Hayden swayed and staggered at each of my blows, and soon I had him cowering along the wall, his fists covering his face as I swung wildly.

“That’s enough-”

Carl had come into the room. He glanced down at Troy, narrowing his eyes at him before taking three long strides across the floor and grabbing me by the hair, pulling me off of Hayden.

He tightened his grip on me as he pulled me out of the room by my hair, tossing me into the tunnel.

“Where are you taking me?” | bit out as the red – eyed Rogue covered the entrance of the room behind us.

“Back to Tasia. She’s ready for you now.”

Carl led me through the tunnel, which forked at one point, reading us along a narrow passageway full of moss and tangled tree roots, the space having been taken over by nature for some time.

“Don’t think about running, Maeve,” he said coolly, “it’s entirely too easy to get lost in here.”

“It must feel like home to you,” I quipped, my tone dry and sarcastic.

“Close,” he replied, smirking. “Did you ever hear the fable?”

“About how Morrighan chased Lycaon out of what is now Winter Forest? Yes -”

“Ah, yes. That did happen. But did you hear what she did, exactly? How she used her power to try and stop her twin?”

I shook my head. He was walking behind me, holding a lantern up as we walked into the pitch black of the tunnel, which had now turned into an intricate cave system.

“Well, she used her powers to bring down the north east ern mountains, sparking a massive volcanic explosion, so leg end goes. Lycaon had no choice but to leave his family behind and seek refuge elsewhere-”

“But he left his mate and had children for another woman. That is where the people of Dianny came from, from what I was told. He sounds like a total douche-”

Carl flicked me sharply on the back of head.

“Ah, well. Many years had gone by, by the time that hap pened. The family he left behind burrowed into mountains,

living within the cave systems created by the eruption. The same caves we stand in now.”

“Here? How is that possible? The eastern mountains are hundreds of miles away!”

“Morrighan prayed to her mother, who had already left them, for guidance and help. Lycaon’s betrayal angered the Goddess herself, you see. Morrighan had access to that anger, and her powers showed it.

“Think back on what you know of your mother, and ances tors. Tell me, when has a White Queen ever used her powers to their fullest? It’s a once in a lifetime occurrence, from what I’m told. Your mother’s life was spared when her true mate took on her burden of death, and he was only spared because your mother used the Moonlight Lily, which wasn’t hers to take.

“Lycenna had been tending to that plant for hundreds of years and it was sacred to us. But your grandmother used her gift to heal her pack during a sickness, I believe? How boring. Especially when she could’ve brought down entire kingdoms had she simply prayed for it-”

“It’s because White Queens are good.”

“No, it is because they are weak, Maeve. You used your gift to see your future, didn’t you? That’s what Tasia said. She said you didn’t mean to do it,

and for whatever reason you were spared. You won't have the chance to do it again, I'm

afraid. How sad. Watch your step, now-"

I stumbled as we began to walk along a decline. He held the lantern up over my head, illuminating a massive cave, the light reflecting off huge stalactites that formed like columns

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all around us.

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"Tasia will destroy the stones. Once she does that, and kills both you and your mother, the Moon Goddess will have no physical tie to our world. We'll be free of her, and Lycaon's descendants can finally rule what is rightfully theirs."

"Why trick Damian and Romero into saying the powers had indescribable powers?"

"It wasn't a lie, not for the average wolf. Any power out side of being able to shift is infallible to them, you know. We needed their help to access you, Maeve. All I had do was offer Damian riches, and the possibility of having a single day added to his life, and he was in."

I remembered what my Dad had told me before the ball, that no one else could know about the moonstones. He, and Carl, were right in that regard. Greed was rampant. And what did everyone want, even if it was never mentioned?

Power.

We walked on for a moment longer, swallowed by the vastness of the great cave. How often I had explored the forest outside of the castle grounds whenever we visited Mirage when I was a child, never knowing such a place existed beneath my feet.

I could see a light nearby, reflecting off the stalactites as we covered more ground. The strange, crystalline formations

gave way to a large open area.

And I saw my Mom.

“Mom?” | stammered, unable to hide not only my shock

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but my deep concern. “How did you get here?”

“Maeve, don’t say anything,” she warned, turning her gaze back to an area that was hidden from view by several large columns of crystal.

A fire burned in the center of the space, but the flames were strange. They were the brightest, most vivid blue I had ever seen, and beneath the fire, no embers burned. I saw the eudialyte stones on second glance, the flames licking over their shiny surfaces, making them glow.

A cloaked figure stepped into view as Carl pulled me to a stop, squeezing my shoulder hard.

The woman let her hood fall back, revealing Grace, the former High Priestess.

“Fancy meeting you here,” I snarled. She only smiled, giving me a tight, businesslike nod in greeting.

“Well, now we can begin,” Tasia said from her perch atop one of the crystal formations. She hopped down, brushing pale dust from her pants as she stalked toward me, taking me forcibly by the elbow and leading me over to where Mom was standing. I could now see the rest of the space, my view no longer blocked by obstacles.

| gasped as I met Hanna’s eyes, her face bruised and bloodied, as she sat next to Rowan, who was kneeling, his wrists bound behind his back, looking just as beaten.

“What the hell -” | started, but Mom reached out to me, taking my hand in hers. I could feel her trembling, but her face remained sharp, focused, and expressionless.

“I’m going to ask you again,” Tasia sneered, walking over to Hanna as she directed her words at Mom. “Where are the stones?”

“I don’t know,” Mom said softly..

Tasia smiled, chuckling to herself. Then she wound back her arm and slapped Hanna so violently the sound echoed through the cave for several seconds.

“Get your hands off of her you filthy bitch!” I said, yanking my hand free of Mom’s grasp and starting forward.

“Ha! Oh, Maeve. You can end the torment now if you just tell me where the stones are.”

“I won’t,” I said, swallowing against the fury and fear tightening my throat, “I wouldn’t, even if I knew.”

“Carl,” Tasia called out, tilting her head in his direction, “Tell me. Have the infant princes been located yet?”

My heart dropped into my stomach.

“Don’t tell her anything, Maeve!” Hanna screamed before Carl could reply.

“We have rogues watching the safehouse as we speak, Tasia.”

“Ah, that is good news.” She turned to face me, arching her brow. “Ready to tell me where the stones are?”

“You’re going to kill all of us anyway,” I spat, “including my children, who carry my blood. Why would it matter if I tell you where the stones are, since you have no bargaining chip, Tasia? What are you going to do, let my children live?”

“You know I cannot do that,” she said slyly, giving me a tight smile, “but I could possibly spare your mate.”

I swallowed and lowered my gaze, shaking my head. “No. Troy would rather die than carry on without us, Tasia. I will not tell you where the stones are. I will not let you have them.”

“I’m sure your father will be more apt to tell me. That is, if he survives whatever battle is taking place on the surface. He was once a Rogue, was he not?”

“He was,” Mom answered, her throat bobbing as she swallowed.

“And you saved him from a life of emptiness and sorrow when you changed him back to his former self? Then, you used the Moonlight Lily to save him? Ah, Rosalie, see? You started all of this. That act, that selfless act that saved your mate was the dawn of the prophecy.

“Now your son will perish, and his daughter, the sacred one, will never be. Do you have any regrets, I wonder? Would you have stayed in your little house, with your tyrant of a father and sadist of a step-brother had you known what was in store for you? Twenty – six good years you had. Was it enough?”

Mom’s eyes darkened, her cheeks coloring deeply as she looked at Rowan, who was sneering around the gag in his mouth.

“Do it,” Tasia said shortly, casually as she motioned to the Priestess. Grace looked scared, fear flashing through her eyes as she unsheathed a knife from her belt. It gleamed in the light of the blue fire, and landed with a clang as she dropped it into the flames.

“My mother learned a great deal from the keeper of the stone, the very stone that was stolen from the White Queens long ago. Seraphine. Oh, I do not remember her. She left us before I was born. I had no idea a moonstone had been hidden in Dianny until my mother made it known to you, Maeve, and to Troy. She kept it from me on purpose. Now, I know why. Maybe she saw this moment in my future, knew I would turn on her.”

“You still have a chance to stop this, Tasia. You too, Grace. I knew you to be a good woman for a long time.” Mom’s voice echoed through the cavern.

Grace shifted her eyes to her feet, a single tear falling from her silver lashes.

“Too late for all of that,” Tasia sighed. Then, to my utter shock, she reached into the flames and grabbed the knife, gritting her teeth as her skin wilted and reddened around its hilt.

Crazy bitch.

“Any last words?” she asked the group, looking around.

I was too stunned to register her movements, watching the skin of her hand blistered where she held the knife. I felt sick to my stomach by the sight and the smell of burning flesh. I almost didn’t notice Tasia drive the scalding knife into Rowan’s chest.

Mom screamed, lunging forward, but was held back by Carl, who forced her to her knees. Hanna was pushing against Tasia, fighting her for the knife. I wondered for a split second why none of us, other than Rowan, had been tied up.

But then I realized this was exactly what Tasia wanted. A Challenge. A reckoning. A trial.

Our deaths couldn't be easy. We needed to be prey, and she the predator. When we were gone, the story of our deaths would live on. She wanted nothing more than to look like the hero of Lycaon, not a murderess who executed her victims one by one.

I didn't realize I was moving in on her until I had her by the shoulders. I spun her around, looking her in the eyes for a fraction of a second.

Then I headbutted her so hard my vision momentarily went black

She staggered backward, dropping the knife.

"Maeve, GO! Go find your Dad! Please!" Mom cried.

Carl let go of her, stunned as Tasia fell to her knees.

I looked down, grabbing the knife before Carl could lunge for it. I held it out, pointing it at him as I backed away towards the entrance of the cavern.

"Maeve, RUN!"

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 329

Chapter 109: At the Cost of Her Own Life

Troy

Hayden was sitting on a rock, chewing loudly as he snacked on what looked like a piece of jerky. I grimaced at the sound, shifting my weight to sit more comfortably on the cold dirt floor of the tunnel.

"You're welcome for the clothes," Hayden quipped, "I figured I could offer you one last kindness by not having your balls dragging in the dirt while we wait for, uh, whatever happens."

“And what exactly is going to happen?” I asked tersely. Hayden shrugged. “Why are you here, exactly?” | asked, genuinely confused. Hayden was a dumbass, as thick as they come. I found it highly unlikely he had much, if anything, to offer Tasia.

“Carl took a liking to me, I think. I’m not so bad once you get to know me.”

“You’re a rapist and murderer-” | bit out. Hayden chuckled.

“Yeah, well. Whatever world Tasia and Carl are gonna make once they have the stones... it won’t matter. Everyone I

ve wronged will be dead. A clean slate.”

“You’re the worst,” | mumbled, biting the inside of my cheek as I tried to come up with a plan.

0001 “I had been working with Damian, you know. I knew every

thing he was planning on doing with that map everyone was looking for. Damian sent me to Valoria to meet with Carl after you and the princess took off on that pirate ship. I figured Carl and Tasia had more to offer me than Damian did. They said I’d be an Alpha, that I could live in the castle. Stuff like that.”

“In exchange for what?”

“Betraying Damian. Killing him when he returned to Valoria with whatever the God’s name is... Lyon, whatever-”

“Lycaon,” I corrected.

“Yeah, that’s what I said. Anyway, Damian never came back, and then we got word that the princess had returned to Winter Forest, so... I just hung out with them. Like I said before, I did have sex with Tasia-”

“Cool,” I replied dryly. “You realize these people are going to kill you, right? You’re not like them. You’ll be useless to them when this is all over.”

He ignored me, biting into another piece of jerky he had fished out of his jacket pocket.

“I bet they’ll spare Maeve, you know? They’ll need her blood, or whatever.”

| swallowed against the fury, willing myself to keep my mouth shut.

“I bet if I asked, they’d give her to me, you know, as a prize for helping them,”

I bucked against my restraints, the rope binding my hands

behind my back going taunt and biting into my skin.

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“Oh, calm down, Troy. I’ll be gentle=”

A bang rang out through the tunnel, then the sound of falling rock. I turned my head toward the broken door that was leaned against the entrance to the room, then I heard voices raised in alarm, then snarling.

Several screams echoed through the tunnel, and I slowly turned my head to Hayden, who had gone pale.

“Our guys, or yours?” | asked, running my tongue along my lower lip.

Hayden’s jaw flexed, concern glossing over his eyes as an other scream ripped through the tunnel, and then the space was swallowed by silence.

A wolf burst through the door, sending splinters of wood flying. He was lean and a soft golden brown in the dim light of the handful of oil lanterns that hung on nails along the walls. Blood dripped from his teeth as he looked at me, recognition flashing behind his eyes as he slowly turned his gaze to Hayden.

“Get em’,” I breathed, then winced as Hayden screamed and scrambled from his perch on the rock. Keaton lunged for ward, tackling Hayden to the ground.

Robbie ran through the entrance of the room, panting as he frantically looked around. He looked absolutely wild, robbed of his “gentle but somewhat violent giant” look. He hadn’t shifted, but had definitely been fighting by the look of his tattered clothing and bloodied knuckles.

“He’s gonna make this slow,” Robbie huffed as he cut through my restraints. “I don’t wanna be around for it.”

“We’ll give them some privacy,” | swallowed, closing his eyes as Hayden began to beg for mercy. “Is it just you and Keaton?” | asked, rubbing my wrists where the skin had been rubbed raw from the rope.

“Aye, no. Ethan is up above, battling with Rogues. Ever seen a Rogue before, Troy? Creepy looking creatures. The Drogomor warriors are takin’ care of ’em, though. Rosalie ran in here alone, before we could stop her. This is a big tunnel system, left over from the war from what Ethan said. He thought they had all been filled in.”

“We have to find Maeve and Hanna. They’re likely with Tasia. Are... is everyone safe? The kids?”

Robbie nodded, clapping me on the shoulder as he led me away from the grisly scene taking place between Keaton and Hayden behind us.

“They’re fine. Safe.”

I took a strained breath.

We hadn’t gotten far in the tunnel before running into more of Tasia’s warriors. With no time to shift, we fought them off one by one. I took the brunt of the beating, my face black and blue with bruises by the time we took down the last man, but finally, we made it into the main part of the tunnel system, which was a large circular area lit by more lanterns and littered with supplies.

“Maybe we should shift, it might be faster.”

“I dunno if that’s true. It took Keaton a long time, and it was painful?”

“What? How so?”

A scream rang out through the tunnel. All of the hair on my body stood on end as I recognized the scream as Maeve’s, and I turned hurriedly toward the sound.

“Going somewhere, so soon?” Carl said as he stepped forward into the lantern light. He was panting, sweat prickling on his brow as though he had been chasing someone. I spun around to face him, adrenaline pulsing through my veins.

“Where is she?” I demanded, my hands clenched into fists.

Carl didn’t have a second to answer before Keaton, still in his wolf form and finished with Hayden, leapt on Carl, knocking him to the ground.

Keaton had him pinned to the ground, his teeth inches away from his neck.

“Stop! We need him alive!” Ethan was barreling down the tunnel toward us, covered in all kinds of things; blood and dirt and a few sticks stuck in his hair. He stopped short of us, looking frantically around the tight space. “Where is everyone? Maeve, Rowan? Rosalie?”

“Carl took Maeve somewhere, Hanna... I’m not sure. And I haven’t seen Rosalie-”

“Where’s Rowan?” Ethan was panicked. He looked down at Carl, who was grimacing under Keaton’s weight, Keaton paw pressed into his neck.

“It’s too late, your precious boy is dead.”

“Dad!” Maeve screeched, running up behind us from the depths of the tunnel. She was just as dirty as the rest of us, but her face was lined with terror. “Oh, Goddess, Dad, we have to—we have to—Mom is-”

“Maeve, hang on-” I tried to go to her but Ethan held out his hand, stopping me.

A strange rumbling sound echoed through the tunnel. The lanterns on the walls began to vibrate, their oil-lit flames trembling as the shaking began to grow severe.

“Get her out!” Ethan bellowed, pushing Maeve toward me. I looked down at Keaton, who bared his teeth, waiting for the green light to bite into Carl’s neck.

“You’re too late! It’s over!” Carl laughed, grinning like an idiot.

I grabbed Maeve and pulled her to my chest, holding her tight.

“They have people watching the safe house. The boys, Troy-”

“Go to them. You and Robbie. I need to help your dad-”

Maeve put something in my hand, a knife, and gave me the most loving, knowing look I’d ever seen.

“I love you,” I whispered, wondering if it would be the last time I’d have a chance to say it.

“Troy!” she said in protest, but Robbie had already closed the short distance between us, gently taking Maeve by the

waist and hurrying her away as dust and dirt began to fall from the ceiling of the tunnel.

Ethan was gone, swallowed by the tunnel's depths as he ran through the darkness.

"Shift back, Keaton!" I commanded, but Keaton hesitated, an unreadable look flashing in his eyes. He looked down at Carl, who was wide-eyed.

How it happened, I wasn't entirely sure, but Keaton lunged and slammed his whole weight into Carl. Carl's head bounced against the floor on impact, and he was knocked out cold. It was impressive, but I didn't have a chance to say so. Keaton was trying in vain to shift back to his human form.

An entire minute went by before Keaton was able to shift, and it was pure agony. He was red and panting by the end of it, shaking as he wobbled and using the wall to support himself. He pointed to the lantern, and for the first time, I noticed the red stones hanging from each of them, the same stone found beneath Dianny, and what their city had been carved out of.

"Oh, shit. Are you okay?"

"Get this motherf*cker out of his clothes," Keaton hissed, trembling as we reached down and began to undress Carl.

Another scream ripped through the tunnel, followed by a rush of chilled wind. Whatever was happening in the endless darkness wasn't good, not at all.

"Just leave him," I said to Keaton, who was tying the laces on the boots he had taken from Carl. "If he tries to escape, he'll run right into the Drogomor warriors. If he chases after us,

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well, he'll be barefoot. We have an advantage."

Keaton said nothing in reply as we made our way through the darkness. I took a lantern from the wall, holding it out in front of me as I jogged. We came to a fork, and waited.

It felt like time stood still as we waited for any clue of which direction to go.

But then another gust of wind came through the tunnel from one end of the fork, and I knew in my bones that it would lead us to Tasia.

“Is it a trap?” Keaton asked quietly. I shrugged.

“Maeve got out. That has to mean something. Let’s go.”

We moved on and soon found ourselves walking out of the tunnel and along a narrow path that cut through the center of a tall, wide cavern lined with stalactites and crystals of which I didn’t know the names. I gasped, unable to hide my surprise. It was beautiful.

But the air was electric.

We walked on, further down into what turned out to be a massive cave with several levels, each bigger than the first. Finally, we saw a faint light in the distance, a fire of some kind.

“Oh, no-” I said, but Keaton ran ahead of me, stopping me from saying anything further.

There was a wide, circular area in front of us with a fire in the center. I could see Rowan lying on his side, a pool of blood surrounding him. Rosalie was draped over him, and I couldn’t tell if she was protecting him, or dead herself.

But then I saw Hanna move into view, her hair flying around her face as she held her hands out to someone hidden by a wall of stalactites shaped like columns. She looked up at us, her eyes wide.

“Get them out of here!” she screamed, and Keaton and I ran to her in time to see Tasia toss her backward with a gust of wind.

We reached Rosalie and Rowan, not stopping to see if they were okay before I tossed Rowan over my shoulder and Keaton lifted Rosalie in his arms.

“He’s hurt, but he-he has my blood-” she said weakly.

“Where the f*ck is Ethan?” Keaton hissed as we backed out of the clearing, carrying our burdens. Tasia hadn’t even looked in our direction. She looked totally changed, almost unrecognizable.

Another gust of wind knocked Hanna to her knees.

“Hanna! Get up!” | bellowed.

Hanna turned her head, her eyes full of tears as she mouthed, “Go.”

“I got jumped by some of those bastard Rogues!” Ethan said hoarsely, his face reddened as he skidded to a stop behind where Keaton and I were standing. They must have dragged him down the other path. “Give-Give her to me!” He grabbed Rosalie out of Keaton’s arms.

The cavern began to tremble. I looked around, my breath catching in my throat as my gaze settled on a stalactite hanging from the ceiling of the cavern. They had been dripping

water on us the whole way down here, but now it had stopped. The water droplets were suspended in thin air. I slowly turned my gaze back to Hanna, locking eyes with her. Tears were rolling down her cheeks. She glanced at Rowan, her mouth twitching into a desperate smile before she looked back at me.

“Go,” she mouthed again, choking back a sob.

Oh, Goddess. She was going to bring this entire cave down on top of Tasia at the cost of her own life.

I took the knife Maeve had given me, and tossed it in Hanna’s direction, the metal clanging against the stone floor of the clearing.

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 330

Chapter 110: Enough was Enough

Hanna

Enough was enough.

Tasia was tiring; I knew that much.

I was watching how she used the powers that we shared, trying to make sense of what exactly she was doing. She was moving in and out of consciousness, dipping into the dream

realm, the spirit realm, to harness the powers she had there to bring them into our reality, creating massive, earth-trembling gusts of wind that knocked me down several times.

She was not as powerful as she thought. It was likely, as I watched her begin to struggle, that she was in pain. And not just physically, but emotionally. Every time she took hold of her powers, she shed tears; her face twisted in agony. She had used these powers to kill her family. Her parents, her brothers and sisters. Her pack, families and children.

All out of greed. All for power. Power that was slipping through her fingers.

I was what she wanted this whole time. Her eagerness to destroy the moonstones and kill the last of the White Queens was Carl's desire, something he had planted within her and watered over years and years of submitting to her culture, of being the only one who possesses powers she didn't understand and yearning to be close to someone who did.

But I'd had someone who understood me. My mother.

And her proclivity to nurture me, to build me in her own image, had been the reason I closed myself off and detested my powers in the first place.

I was not like Tasia.

And she hated me for it.

So, I took blow after blow, putting myself in her path so Rosalie could save Rowan's life. Rosalie's powers should have worked, but the blue flames rising from the fire built on a base of eudialyte stones, sacred stones that blocked the powers of our kind, had heated the silver blade she used to stab Rowan through the chest, poisoning him and rendering Rosalie's powers to heal him useless.

His mother had nearly drained herself trying to save his life.

I had nothing but faint hope that she had been successful. I could feel him hanging on. He was fighting.

And that shred of hope was all that kept me upright now as Tasia continued her attack.

Was it the fire itself that was making her weak? Was it the stones she lined the tunnel with, making it impossible to mind-link, and likely shift?

Why did the stones affect her?

And not me?

I glanced at Troy as he backed away from the clearing in the cavern, his eyes locked on mine as he carried Rowan over his shoulder as though he was weightless. He understood my

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plan. He noticed the droplets of water suspended in the air. He knew what I had to do to end this once, and for all.

I turned from my Rowan, wondering if I'd ever see him again.

And then, I closed my eyes, and pictured the unfamiliar temple from my dreams.

It was quiet in this realm. The waves lapped the shore in a rhythmic fashion like usual. I was standing just off the shore, waiting, wondering if I'd see Rowan appear like he had the

night I saw the girl with the white hair for the first time

But he didn't come

I walked forward, my feet bare against the sand. The temple rose up in the front of me as I neared the entrance, the granite towering over me as I walked through the door.

It was clean inside, no cobwebs or dust.

But a single white rose lay on the altar, its petals wilted and yellowed along the edges like it had been cut some time ago.

The girl with the white hair was sitting in the pew closest to the altar, her back to me. She didn't turn to look at me as I walked forward, sitting a row behind her on the opposite side of the aisle. I sat in silence for a moment, wondering if she would speak, but she did not.

She sniffled, and reached up to wipe tears from her eyes.

2128 “What is your name?” I asked.

“What do you think my name is?” she replied, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear.

“Selene,” I whispered without thinking, and she turned to me, her eyes creasing with pleasure.

“No one has ever said my name before,” she said softly as a tear fell from her white eyelashes, rolling down her cheek. “I like how it sounds. You must remember it, for later.”

“I will.”

She seemed pleased and gave me another tight-lipped smile as she looked at me almost as though she was trying to mesmerize my face.

“I won’t remember this,” she said, looking even more pained than before, “but I want to remember it. It seems un fair to me that I won’t.”

“Why won’t you remember?”

“You know.” She turned her face away, settling her gaze back on the altar. I couldn’t read the expression on her face, as hard as I tried.

“Are you stuck here?”

She shook her head, looking down at her lap.

“No. I’m just waiting.”

“For what?”

She turned back to me, more tears welling in the corners of her eyes. Her lower lip was trembling, and I felt the sudden urge to rise from my seat and go to her. I sat next to her and

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took her hand in mine.

"I don't know what's going to happen next," she whispered, her voice trembling with indescribable pain. "I don't know if we will ever meet. But I hope you fight. He needs you. He isn't supposed to lose you now."

"Who?"

"Do you know who I am?" she asked in a cry of desperation, squeezing my hand.

All I could do was look at her for a moment, thinking she was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I reached up and ran my head against her cheek, wiping away her tears. She leaned into my touch.

"I think I do-"

"We'll never meet again, not like this," she whispered, "I'm scared -"

"Everything is going to be alright," I coaxed.

"He comes here all the time now," she whispered, looking at the white rose on the altar. "You call him Rowan. He leaves a rose every time. Sometimes I wonder why, after all these years..." she tapered off, then looked up at me.

"He's hurt, very hurt. Do I lose him?"

"I don't know-"

"But you have to know. I saw him here in my dream, he was much older. That means he lives, right?"

... "I don't have those answers! I can't... I only know that you

have to fight. She will take them all away from you. Everything you love. Aunt Maeve will need you. Oliver will need you,"

"Aunt Maeve?"

My heart was tight in my chest as I looked at her, taking in her face. The shape of her eyes. The curve of her mouth.

"Are you-" I started to say but couldn't find the words. I felt as though the air was being squeezed from my lungs, and then I was cast into nothingness.

“Wake up,” she whispered, squeezing my hand. “You have to wake up!”

I blinked and was back in the cavern.

Water pooled around my feet. The cavern was flooding, water running down the stalactites and falling in thick, sulfur smelling droplets over our heads. Tasia was wide-eyed as I slowly looked up at her.

She blinked, then closed her eyes. Her nose was bleeding, and she looked faint. She was tired; she had worn herself out.

All she had left was her ability to shift, which she did. I had several long seconds to gather my thoughts as Tasia struggled into her wolf form.

I thought of the white-haired girl’s words.

Fight.

How I did it, I don’t rightfully know, but just as Tasia shifted I found myself on my knees in front of the fire, reaching for the knife Troy had thrown. It was still covered in Rowan’s blood, and the sight of it made me so incredibly furious.

A rush of water came down from the ceiling of the cavern, putting out the fire.

Tasia lunged, her long, sharp teeth bared in a gaping, open mouth smile as she flew through the air in my direction. I held up my hands to shield myself from her attack, and felt her weight on me, crushing me to the ground.

But I still held the knife.

And it had gone through her chest, all the way to the hilt.

Her teeth were only inches from my face as I pushed against her, trying to get her massive wolf body off of me. I dug the knife deeper, twisting it violently until I felt her start to succumb to what I had hoped would be a fatal blow.

She rose, staggering, then fell onto her side.

I screamed as loud as I could, every ounce of my energy pouring into the cavern as water began to rain down over us, pouring onto the floor. A great vibration caused me to fall onto my knees, making it impossible to stand.

The stalactites were falling, crashing into the clearing and splintering into thousands of pieces all around me.

I closed my eyes as I willed what felt like the last of my powers to come forth and destroy it all.

Just as I heard the ceiling of the cavern begin to crumble, I felt arms coming around my waist, lifting me, pulling me out of harm's way.

"It's done," Ethan said into my ear as he ran from the cavern, carrying me, his voice drowned out by the cavern falling

in on itself.

Troy

Rowan fought against me as we reached the entrance of the tunnel. He was definitely awake and feeling much better, but I knew what it felt like to get stabbed in the chest. He dug his fingernails into my back every time I took a step forward, and I finally had to set him down, unable to carry his weight any further.

"Where the f*ck is Hanna? You bastards left her down there?"

"Don't try to stand-" I pleaded, but Rowan rose, his eyes promptly rolling back in his head as he passed out and crumpled to the ground.

"For the love of the Goddess-" I breathed kneeling to try to rouse him again.

Keaton ran to my side, panting.

"Why the hell did you set him down? We have to get out of here before the whole cave system fails-"

"Ethan went back for her!" Rosalie cried out behind us, running forward and damn near collapsing into Keaton's arms.

"Great, this is just great. We're ten feet from safety and the king of idiots decides to be a f*cking hero-" Keaton was going to get himself killed by Ethan one day, and he would likely deserve it.

“He’s going back for my mate, you piece of shit!” Rowan growled as he came to, continuing to fight against me as I tried to pick him up again. He staggered to his feet, leaning on me for support. “I’m going back too-”

“MAEVE!” roared Robbie from outside the entrance of the tunnel. I turned to the entrance, seeing a figure appear. It was Maeve, and she was climbing down into the tunnel, her eyes wide with panic.

“I couldn’t leave you behind!” she cried, tears falling down her cheeks. She looked frantic.

But just as she breached the entrance of the tunnel, a deep tremor shook us all so violently that I almost lost my footing. Maeve braced herself on the wall, looking at me with terror in her eyes.

I heard barking behind me, and then Keaton cursing something about Duck, the half-brained dog, finding his way back to us before Ethan did.

“Maeve, get out!” I cried, but my words were washed away by the sound of the tunnel beginning to cave in behind me.

I pushed Rowan toward her, and she grabbed him but fell backward onto her bottom. Robbie appeared at the entrance and reached down to grab them both, pulling them up through the entrance before the ceiling of the tunnel gave way and bathed the entrance in a tangle of rocks and tree branches.

It was totally, and completely, dark.

I coughed, finding it hard to breathe in the dirt-filled air.

Silence was all around me.

“Hello?” I said, unable to register what had just happened.

Duck licked my hand, and I grimaced, but reached down into the darkness and found the top of his head, scratching him behind the ears.

“Troy?” Rosalie’s voice sounded behind me, and I fumbled towards it in the dark, stepping on Keaton’s boot.

“Ah! Watch it!” Keaton hissed, grabbing my arm.

Me, Rosalie, Keaton, and the dog were trapped, but we were okay.

A crash rang out behind us, followed by sharp curses and a choked sputtering cough.

“F*cking broken door-” Ethan. I almost fell to my knees.

“Ethan?” Rosalie squeaked, and I could hear her beside me stumbling in the pitch blackness, turning toward his voice. “Do you have Hanna?”

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 331

Chapter 111: We Got Lucky

Maeve

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Robbie was holding me and Rowan to his chest, his body trembling as he took deep, strained breaths. The dust was clearing, the forest floor now visible through pockets of fog and debris. I blinked, my eyes ringing so violently it made my headache.

Rowan was fighting to free himself from Robbie’s grasp. Robbie let him go, and Rowan fell to his knees, coughing so hard his eyes began to water.

We were soaked from the rain and covered in mud. I looked around, turning in Robbie’s direction to face what was left of the entrance to the tunnel.

The hill was nothing but a pile of shattered stone and broken trees. I closed my eyes.

It was over-and at a tremendous cost.

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“We have to go in for them,” I whispered weakly, unable to hide the pain in my voice. I hadn’t yet registered what had happened.

“Aye, we will. I think I can... I can move some of the rocks out of the way. I think-”

Rowan was already frantically pulling rocks from the entrance, screaming curses as he ripped splintered tree branches from the rubble. He was calling for Hanna, his voice

so desperate it brought hot, painful tears to my eyes. I swallowed against my own fear and grief.

The three of us had been the only ones to make it out.

The trees rustled above us, their bare branches scratching against each other. The forest seemed to moan, the sound echoing through the clearing sounding almost like the cry of a woman, someone hurt.

Someone dying.

Robbie held me close as a huge, violent gust of wind whipped through the space, nearly knocking us over. I knew it was her, Tasia, and as soon as the wind ceased, the sky gave way to stillness once more...

I knew she was gone. Dead.

"Troy," I cried, turning into Robbie's chest as I began to cry.

"We're gonna get 'em," Robbie assured me, but his voice betrayed his words. I could tell he was sure we would find them, but whether or not they were alive after being buried under several feet of rock and dirt was something he wasn't confident in.

"Damn it!" Rowan cried as he began to toss rocks bigger than his head away from the pile of rubble. His hands were bloodied, torn, and oozing red as he dug and dug and dug.

Robbie let me go and went to him, leaving me standing in the clearing. I watched Robbie begin to move some of the bigger rocks out of the way, waiting, holding my breath.

I heard barking.

I looked around, unsure in which direction it came from. I heard it again, and this time Rowan and Robbie noticed as well. Robbie began to pull rocks away from the pile at a speed

that seemed unnatural. He bellowed at Rowan, telling my brother to get out of the way as he began to pull on the exposed roots of one of the trees that used to cover the hill.

Rowan didn't move out of the way-he jumped up to help and the two men pulled with all of their strength, grunting with effort.

The tree shifted, then gave way, and Robbie and Rowan only had a split second to jump out of its path before several large boulders broke loose from the pile and crashed onto the forest floor. Rowan screeched, and Robbie bounded over to him, freeing him from the large rock that had landed squarely on his foot.

I caught movement out of the corner of my eye, turning my attention to the large hole that was exposed in the pile of rubble, and saw Duck poke his head out.

"DUCK!" I screamed, falling to my knees. Voices began to rise from the hole, and Robbie left Rowan to nurse his foot, jumping back onto the pile of stone and pulling rocks away from the opening.

He reached in, taking hold of someone, and pulled my mom out of the rubble.

"Hi Robbie," she said with a little laugh, "Ethan's next but,"

Dad damn near pushed Mom down the pile of rocks on his way out. He was covered in mud and dust, his hair standing on end and his eyes flaming with fury and frustration as he

slid down the rocks. He was limping badly, winching and cursing as he walked out into the center of the clearing.

Troy came out next, turning around to pull Keaton up. He said something to Robbie, and Robbie nodded in agreement before disappearing into the remains of the tunnel system.

"Troy!" I cried, unable to stop myself from sobbing. He turned to me, smiling, and took what looked like the first deep breath he had taken in a long, long time.

I could hear Mom fussing over Dad, who was physically dodging her attempts to help him as he stumbled around the clearing. He locked eyes with me, narrowing them until they were only slits.

“This is over, it’s done,” he breathed, his voice edged with bitterness. He looked around the clearing, his eyes settling on each of us as he willed our obedience. No more magic, no more moonstones, no more epic quests into the unknown.

I could tell he had more he wanted to say, but he was still a man of few words. He motioned towards Mom, stopping her from advancing on him to heal his twisted ankle.

With that, Dad stormed off through the clearing, quietly cursing his grievances as he fought against the dense thickets of brush in his attempt to go back to the castle.

Mom looked at me, shrugging her shoulders.

“Are you okay?” she asked softly

I nodded, swallowing against the lump in my throat. Adrenaline was coursing through my veins, keeping me upright. “Okay. I’m going to go after him. Your dad is fine, just,”

“A giant crab?”

“A king crab,” she smirked, using the term Rowan and I used to call each other as children in lieu of something more aggressive or naughty when we were vexed. She walked over to me, embracing me fully. She reached up, wiping the tears from my cheeks before kissing me soundly on the temple, resting her forehead against mine. “We’re okay. It’s over. We can move on now.”

“Okay.” It was all I could manage to say.

Mom ran her hand down my back before taking her leave, her body instantly replaced by Troy’s, who pulled me into a tight embrace.

“Are you hurt?” he asked as he pressed me to him.

I shook my head. Whatever scraps and bruises I had would likely be healed by now. "Are you?"

"I got hit in the head with something when the tunnel caved in, but that's all. I'll be fine. Nothing but a scratch. Do you want to go home?"

"I want to get the boys,"

"We will."

I looked over Troy's shoulder to where Keaton was standing, alone. Rowan was nowhere to be seen, and I realized he must have gone into the opening of the tunnel with Robbie to find Hanna.

"Is she dead? Hanna?"

Troy was silent, then shook his head.

"No, she's not dead. She-"

As if I had summoned her, I saw Rowan emerge from the tunnel, holding a limp Hanna in his arms. He had her head pressed against his chest, his eyes full of tears.

I unwrapped my arms from around Troy and stepped around him, noticing the blood on Hanna's mouth and the long, bright right cut on Rowan's arm.

He had tried to heal her.

"She's okay, Maeve. It's time to go home," Rowan said sternly, looking past me.

He walked past me and Troy without saying a word, disappearing into the thickets.

"Well, that f*cking sucked," Keaton said dryly, dusting dirt from the pants he was wearing.

"It's over-" Troy began, but Keaton held up his hand to silence him.

"Carl got away. We don't know where he went." Keaton crossed his arms over his chest.

“But he was with us,”

“What happened in there, exactly?” Robbie asked, glancing from Troy to Keaton.

Keaton took a deep breath, glancing at Troy through his lashes.

“Nothing really. We were spared, that’s all I can say. The tunnel came down on top of Ethan and Hanna, but that broken door fell on them first, blocking the rocks from crushing them. We just... we just waited. It was completely dark,” Troy began.

“Duck started digging; we could hear him. We couldn’t see anything. That’s when you and Rowan started pulling the rocks away. Hanna refused to leave. She kept saying it wasn’t over. She was scared, trying to dream... whatever it’s called, to find Carl,” Keaton continued, shaking his head.

“Carl isn’t powerful. There’s not much he can do at this point but run,” Troy exhaled, shaking his head.

“And I say let him. I agree with Ethan. I’m done.”

Keaton looked around, then shrugged. Duck was sitting at the edge of the clearing, trembling, waiting for us to make a move toward home.

“The warriors went back for reinforcements to help dig ya’ll out,” Robbie said as he began to walk toward the edge of the clearing, his voice fading as they stepped into the thickets.

Troy, Duck, and I were soon all that was left in the clearing.

Troy took my hand, squeezing it.

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Dawn was approaching, the sky above our heads a soft, navy blue dappled with faint stars. The trees were still; the only sound was the occasional crumbling of rocks.

“I could use a beer,” Troy smiled.

“Maybe something stronger,” I added, doing my best to return his smile.

Hand in hand, we walked away from the pile of rocks, and away from the threat of Tasia.

I sighed deeply as I sat up against the headboard, all three boys asleep on my chest. Troy was asleep in the high-backed armchair on the opposite side of our room at the castle, his head lolling on his shoulder as he slept.

We had returned to the castle in the early hours of the morning, filthy and exhausted beyond belief. A shower and new clothes later, the boys had been brought back to the castle, and we took them up to our room to sit together in silence as they nursed, the five of us dozing shallowly until the early afternoon.

Troy had been summoned by my dad, and he spent the remainder of the day going over what had transpired in the tunnels. When I awoke in the late evening to a dinner tray being carried into the room by a maid, I found Troy back with us, sleeping in the chair so as not to disturb our slumbering.

I got up and laid the boys in their crib one by one, then ate in relative silence. I had never seen Troy sleep so hard.

The bedroom door opened just as I was sitting back in bed, and Gemma slid inside, wincing as the door creaked as she shut it behind her.

"You're fine. They're all dead asleep," I said softly, reaching for the now tepid cup of tea I had left on my nightstand.

"I wanted to hear from you what happened," she whispered as she crawled into the bed, laying down against Troy's pillow. I closed my eyes, fighting another wave of fresh fatigue. I sighed, then told her everything. Gemma listened in silence, which was occasionally broken by the cooing of the babies and infrequent snoring from Troy.

"The warriors are combing through Mirage right now. They've apprehended several rogues in the forest, too. Is it true that Carl is missing?"

I nodded, draining my teacup and setting it back down on the bedside table.

"Yeah, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried about him. He was the ringleader in all of this. He found Tasia somehow, through the dream realm where Hanna goes when she-" I paused, leaning back against my propped up pillows. "Have you seen Hanna today?"

“No, but I’ve seen Rowan. He’s been an absolute mess all day long, snapping at everyone. Same with your dad.”

“Hanna killed Tasia; she ended it. I want to... thank her. When the time is right. I hope she’s resting.”

“I think your mom is with her. Your mom seems okay, though.”

“We got lucky.” I closed my eyes, ready to rid myself of the turmoil of the last few months. In a month’s time I would be in Avondale, far away from it all, with a clean slate, starting from scratch.

“I just wanted to check on you. Do you need anything?” Gemma whispered, but I shook my head.

“I’m just going to sleep while the boys are sleeping. Tomorrow morning I’ll-I’ll come down for breakfast and figure things out.”

Gemma nodded and rose from the bed, glancing over her shoulder at me before she left the room.

I closed my eyes once again.

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 332

Chapter 112: The Next Adventure

Maeve

It was 7:00 in the morning, and the pale sunlight coming through the windows of the informal dining room off the kitchen was doing nothing to help illuminate the room.

Thad woken to Troy readying the boys for the day. He was trying not to wake me, but my sleep had been so shallow I had only been lingering on the edge of true sleep for several hours at that point. He was taking the boys to Ingra so I could rest, for which I was thankful, but the hour between 6:00 and 7:00 proved to be restless and lonely.

I wasn’t the only one who hadn’t been able to sleep. Gemma was seated across from me at the round table, stirring sugar into her coffee. Ernest was using his finger to swipe a taste of oatmeal against George’s tongue, and to

his left sat Rowan, and then Troy, who was talking in a low whisper over the sound of coffee being sipped and silverware scraping against bowls of oatmeal with honey and cream.

Hanna was seated next to me, close enough that her shoulder brushed against mine as she reached for what would be her third bowl of oatmeal. She had color in her cheeks, and her hair was pulled away from her face in a tight ponytail. She looked rested, compared to the rest of us.

It was obvious no one wanted to talk about what had happened. But a stale silence lingered over the table. I slouched, looking down into my untouched breakfast, and

wondered what the hell was going to happen next.

“If... theoretically, that is, you could shift into anything... not just a wolf,” Gemma began, her voice breaking through the blanket of awkward silence, “what would you be?”

“Like an animal, or... object?” Ernest replied, momentarily taking his full attention from George, a spoon covered in oatmeal just inches from the baby’s face. George grabbed the spoon with his chubby fists and brought it to his mouth, giving me a huge, oatmeal-covered grin as I met his eye. I couldn’t help but smile at how pleased he was with himself.

“An object?” Rowan eyed Ernest with suspicion, “Like what? A toaster?”

“You could make everyone a nice snack after battle-” Ernest quipped, which elicited a hearty laugh from Troy.

“Well, I think I’d be an eagle or an owl, for example. I’ve always liked owls,” Gemma said curtly, annoyed that the men were ruining her game.

“I’d still be a wolf,” Rowan interjected, looking slightly peeved.

“Well, that’s no fun, Rowan. You wouldn’t want to be something like a bear or a mountain lion?” Gemma brought her coffee to her lips, arching her brow at him.

“Who would win in a fight? That is the question. A wolf or a mountain lion?” Ernest was fighting to wipe oatmeal from George’s face.

“Oh, a lion, for sure,” Hanna quipped, but the sound of her voice sent a hush over the table. None of us had heard her

1
speak since what happened in the caves.

An awkward few seconds passed, and I felt heat prickling against my cheeks. Why could no one talk about what happened? Even the “family meeting” led by Dad the night before had been silent, awkward. Everyone was too tired or too stunned to add anything to the conversation.

“I’d be a beaver,” Troy said, pouring himself another cup of coffee. Rowan looked shocked. 1

“A beaver? Why on earth-”

“Because I’ve had too dam... much of this conversation this morning.”

Everyone looked at him. Troy’s eyes were shining with mirth as he waited for the group to catch on to his silly joke. Ernest sputtered with laughter, and Gemma rolled her eyes. It took Rowan a moment too long to realize Troy’s ridiculous play on words, and the group immediately turned on him, saying he was the toaster of the group now.

I settled back against my chair, holding my mug of coffee in my hands as I watched the conversation take on a new air of ease. I caught Troy’s eye and smiled softly at him, hoping he caught the silent look of gratitude in my eyes.

The conversation went on without me. After several minutes, Hanna leaned into me, whispering softly in my ear.

“We need to talk,” she whispered. All I could do was nod.

Yes, yes we did.

The atrium was quiet, humid, and misty like usual. I was carrying Oliver in a wide circle, holding him against my shoulder. The other boys were sleeping upstairs with Troy, who had retired from breakfast with his heart set on a long nap, but Oli had been wide awake.

So, when I went down to meet up with Hanna, I took him with me.

He was wide-eyed as we walked around the atrium. He hadn’t yet gotten the hang of his hands, but occasionally reached out to place a shaky fist on a

monstera leaf, often startled by the warm and dampness of its leaves. I watched him in awe, thanking the Goddess for his life, and mine.

Hanna was also walking around, no doubt gathering her thoughts. When we finally met in the center of the atrium, I placed Oli in her hands, watching as she instinctively gathered him to her chest. He cooed, snuggling close against the soft fabric of the sweater she was wearing, and promptly fell asleep.

“Maeve I think... I believe I could be pregnant,” Hanna whispered, her eyes downcast to the sleeping baby in her arms. I swallowed, nodding as I took a seat in one of the wicker chairs.

“We could get you a test-”

She shook her head, a whisper of a smile touching the corner of her mouth as she looked down at me.

“No, it’s early still.”

“What makes you think that you are? Is this because of what Tasia said?”

“Yes, and she was right. I’ve met her, our daughter. I have every reason to believe that what the old woman from Lycenna, my great aunt, said is true... about the prophecy, about what this child will become. I just don’t know what that will look like, exactly. I’m scared, Maeve. She... when I saw her in my dream, when I was in the crystal cavern with Tasia, she was scared too. I’ve seen her twice, Maeve. The first time...”

She proceeded to tell me about the dream she had the night she slept with Rowan. She had finally reached the temple she had been dreaming about for years, standing on the shore just outside of its entrance. It was not the temple of the White Queens, nor any temple familiar to either of us.

And she had seen Rowan, but he was much older.

“He was wearing my ring,” she said, holding up her hand to show me the band of jade on her ring finger, “on his pinky. I didn’t have it yet, when I had the dream. But now...” She sat down on the couch opposite my chair, tilting her head as she looked down at Oli.

“Why was he wearing it?” | asked, an uneasy feeling wrapping itself around my heart.

“I die, Maeve, at some point during our daughter’s childhood. I don’t know how, or why. But when I saw them... when I saw our daughter inside the temple, she was crying. It was a funeral. Oliver was there, but I didn’t know it at the time. He hadn’t been born yet in reality. But his eyes... and his hair... oh Goddess, he will be the perfect mix of you both, Maeve. He was beautiful, and he will be close with my daughter in the future, I believe. He was comforting her.”

Her words hit me like a brick wall. I felt somewhat sick to my stomach as I fought against the feelings of dread bubbling through my system. “Have you told anyone else?”

“No, I haven’t.”

A silence passed between us. I eventually looked over at her, seeing her face expressionless, blank, as though she had already accepted this as truth long ago.

She described the girl from her dreams, who had been a young teenager in both visions. Long, straight white hair. Silver eyes flaked with the same color blue Rowan and I shared and lined with white lashes. When I asked her if she thought the girl was a White Queen already, at such a young age, she shook her head.

“The vision I saw of you and Troy makes me think otherwise. You hadn’t yet become the White Queen, Maeve, and you mentioned the boys were nearing twenty-one. I truly believe Rosalie will grow into old age, and you as well. This girl, my daughter... she is what the old woman said she would be. The Moon Goddess. She will be born that way.”

I swallowed against the absurdity of it but couldn’t shake the nagging feeling that Hanna was right.

“Did she know who she was?”

“When I was in the cavern with Tasia, before I brought the whole place down on her I dream danced, hoping I’d see the girl again. She was there, and she was very upset. She told me I had to fight, and I comforted her. I knew her

name, Maeve, and she said she had never heard it said out loud before. She told me to remember it, and that's when I knew

what she was to me.

"I think... when she's born, she'll have no memory of these visions. I hope she does not. I want her to grow up, be a child, play, and run, and laugh and not be burdened by the circumstances of her birth, of her future.

"When I brought the cavern down, I knew there was a chance you would die. But she hadn't been born yet, so I thought I couldn't die then, and then there was that shred of hope I held, that I'd know her one day..."

Hanna began to cry. I cried as well, my stomach in knots. Hanna had saved us all. We were free of the turmoil of the last year, but not her. Hanna's trials had just begun.

"We'll love her, Hanna-

"I know. I know she will be loved. But how am I – she'll be like me, Maeve. And so, so much more. What am I supposed to do?"

It was a question I couldn't answer, and she knew it. She rocked Oli gently, his weight giving her comfort. My heart squeezed to see it.

"What do you think Oli will become?" I asked, deciding for Hanna's comfort I should steer the conversation away from her theoretical daughter, despite the selfishness I felt.

She smiled down at the baby, sighing deeply. "A king. I think they'll all be kings."

"All of these children will inherit empires, Hanna. I can't... I don't want any more children. If things had been different with

their birth, maybe I'd consider it. But your child will be my heir.

"She'll inherit the North, as the White Queen, when her time comes. She'll be the daughter of the King of the East, Hanna. She'll be a princess. She'll be the grandchild of Queen Rosalie, and King Ethan, unless my Dad is serious about retiring so soon...."

“She’ll be loved, and wanted. Who knows what her future will hold. But just know that we will love her, and love you, Hanna.”

Hanna looked up at me, tears glimmering in her eyes.

“You’ll take care of her-when I’m gone? Both of them, Rowan-”

“I promise.” My voice cracked as I fought to form the words. We locked eyes, the oath passing between us, silently signed and filed away in the recesses of our minds.

“Hanna, the worst is over. Of that I’m certain. Tasia is gone. Lycenna has broken up. Carl is missing, and I don’t believe he’ll cause us any more issues. Your father is the King of the West, and ally. It’s the dawn of a new era, and our children won’t know war... not like our parents did.

“We prevented a war ourselves, Hanna. You guided me and kept me safe while I found the stones. You protected my mother when I couldn’t. You bring Rowan so much happiness.

I can’t... I won’t think of a time, I refuse to think of it, when I don’t have you, when we don’t have you here with us. I won’t. It’s peace time, Hanna. You’re the Luna of Drogomor now. We have to let the rest go.”

She nodded, reaching up to wipe her eyes.

“What’re you guys doing?” Rowan said, startling us both. He was sliding the door to the atrium closed as he entered, noticing the forlorn expressions on our face. “Are you okay?”

I couldn’t help but smile as I glanced at Hanna. Her cheeks pinkened, a silent smile twitching on her own mouth.

“I’m going to take Oliver upstairs and check on Troy. I have a sneaking suspicion he’s not getting the nap he was hoping for with Will and Charlie in the room,” I said with a little laugh, blinking away my own tears.

Hanna rose, carefully setting Oli in my arms.

Tleft them alone, knowing full well that Hanna was going to tell him about their daughter.

And I knew with my entire heart that Rowan was going to be nothing but the happiest he had ever been upon hearing the news.

Troy was leaning over the side of the bed, dark circles under his eyes as he had a hand on Will's belly while he tried to change Charlie's diaper with the other. Will was fussing, struggling against Troy's touch.

"Need some help?" I quipped, closing the door behind me with my foot as I entered our bedroom. Oli opened one eye, vexed by his brother's fussing that had just woken him up.

Troy gave me a look, his eyes slightly red from lack of sleep.

"How about I take the kids down to see Ingra for a while so we can both get some sleep?" I offered. Troy sighed, nodding his head.

"We're taking her with us to Avondale. I already talked to her about it."

"Hmm... you'll have to fight Ernest and Rowan for her, I think."

"Rowan? What use does he have for a nanny?" Troy narrowed his eyes at me.

"Hanna's pregnant, but you can't say anything yet!"

"Are you even supposed to be telling me this?" He laughed, unable to hide the glee in his voice. I shrugged, setting Oli down on the bed and making a funny face at him.

"I'm sure she knows I can't keep a secret to save my life."

"Four grandchildren within... what, a year and a half? Your poor father," Troy shook his head, smiling with mirth.

"Well, hopefully, the news breaks Dad out of the foul mood he's been in the past two days."

I sat on the edge of the bed, reaching over to pull Charlie toward me so I could finish buttoning up his onesie.

"What do you want to do now, Maeve?" Troy asked.

It was an odd question, and I found myself unable to answer. When was the last time we did something that wasn't planned out, or necessary for our survival?

"I think I'm ready to go to Avondale," I answered, looking over at him. "It's time for our next adventure, don't you think?"

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 333

Chapter 113: Like Nothing Happened

Maeve

"Can I have a bite of that?" I asked, motioning toward the turkey leg wrapped in greasy brown paper that Troy was holding up to his mouth as he prepared to take a bite. He arched his brow, then sighed, handing me the leg and shaking his head at me as I took the largest bite possible.

"I could have bought you your own-".

"I didn't want one until you had one," I grinned, enjoying my bite.

Troy wrapped his arm around my shoulders as we continued to walk through the square in the University Center of Mirage, which was now housing a huge market and festival to celebrate the Winter Solstice.

It felt odd being not only this happy but this carefree. Three days ago, I had been standing outside the remains of the cave system, in a white, soiled dress, thinking my family had just been crushed to death.

Now I was walking around Mirage beneath webs of paper lanterns, my mate's arm around my shoulders and his turkey leg, which was now mine, in my hand.

I could see Gemma in the distance, standing in line to buy a mug of mulled wine. Ernest was behind her, George fast

asleep in a carrier strapped to his chest.

“Where are the boys?” I asked, a moment of panic washing over me as the crowd seemed to swell. I knew they were with our family, but I didn’t see them now.

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“With your parents,” Troy said as he pointed off in the distance. Mom was pretty easy to spot with her white hair. She was pushing a double stroller, and Dad was walking beside her, carrying Oliver in his arms. “They’re fine, see? I’m sure your parents will find us when the kids start getting hungry. Speaking of which, since you stole my dinner, I’m

going to have to get something else-”

He turned me toward a long row of booths selling all kinds of treats. I continued to munch on the turkey leg as Troy tried to decide between a basket of fried chicken or a burger. I was hoping for the fried chicken.

“Are there festivals like this in the Isles?” I asked as we waited in line.

Troy shrugged, crunching the empty paper cup of cider and tossing it into a trashcan. “I doubt it. There weren’t before, not under Damian’s rule.”

“Keaton told me once that you used to distract old women from their purses so the rest of the boys could steal,”

“Ah, of course he did,” Troy smiled, shaking his head.

The conversation was momentarily interrupted as Troy stepped forward to order his food, glancing at me before telling the man behind the booth what he wanted. I pointed to the picture of fried chicken, and Troy rolled his eyes, leaning forward to drop a handful of coins into the man’s hand.

I stepped to the side, turning to look over the crowd once again in search of my parents, but they were now lost in the swell of festival goers.

“Anyway,” Troy continued as he turned back to me with a bucket of fried chicken in his hands, “Avondale used to have several hotels along one of their beaches, in a neighborhood that used to house the castle of the Alpha, as well as a handful of mansions built for high ranking pack members from way back in the day-”

“You’re just going to eat it plain? No honey, nor hot sauce?” || interrupted as Troy began to walk away from the booth, passing the table of condiments.

He gave me a dirty look then turned back to the table, doctoring up what would no doubt be my second, or maybe third, dinner.

We fell in step with each other as we continued on through the market, passing a piece of chicken back and forth. I was pleasantly full, and pleased, when Troy ushered us into a sprawling beer garden in the center of the market. I sat on the grass while he bought another round of cider.

I was struck by the oddest sensation of déjà vu as I watched him order the drinks. It felt like just yesterday he had bought me a lemonade during the Spring Festival when I was dying of heat stroke but too enraptured by him to give a damn about myself.

That had been before I knew who he was. Before I knew him as Troy or even as Aaron. My mouth twitched into a smile as I watched him walk back over, giving me a goofy smile.

It was all worth it-every minute, every second of the past ten or eleven months-because it led to this moment right here, right now.

“That man right there, in the red jacket, that bastard cut in front of me in line,” he said as he sat down next to me, handing me the steaming, golden cider.

“Little does he know he just cut in front of the Alpha of Poldesse,” | teased, nudging him with my elbow.

“Maeve?”

“Yeah?”

“What I was saying earlier, about Avondale... look, it’s going to be rough, okay? And not like... not the obvious, that it’s highly likely our titles aren’t going to be met with total acceptance. The Isles are a rough place. They’ve decayed significantly since the war your parents were involved in. I don’t remember it any other way, but I worry... I know you can handle it. I just don’t want you to get your hopes up.”

“Get my hopes up about what?”

“Our standard of living, for one,” he said curtly, taking a deep gulp of his cider. I could smell that his was laced with bourbon, probably from the flask Dad had tucked into Troy’s pocket before we left the castle. “The castle of Poldesse is in ruins; it’s going to need a lot of work. Also, I have very little money. Pennies, honestly, compared to what other Alphas have-”

“You know I don’t care about that-”

“Because you haven’t had to care about that,” he replied, his voice edged with uncertainty. I straightened up a little. “Not that... I know you didn’t grow up in a castle back in Winter Forest, that your parents kept you as humble as possible but... I mean, the castle of Poldesse is falling into the sea, Maeve. It sa hell hole.”

“You’re worried about me not liking where we live?”

“I’m concerned about you coming with me right away. I think you should stay here or in Winter Forest for a few months, until I have things settled in the Isles,”

“Absolutely not,” I retorted, my cheeks prickling with heat. “No, I won’t do that. The boys and I are coming with you from the start. We’ll live on the Persephone if we have to.”

Troy knew me well enough to know I was digging in my heels on this matter. He sighed, looking out over the groups huddled around the picnic tables toward the entrance of the beer garden.

“I don’t know how safe it’s going to be, babe.”

“Well, we’ll make it safe. That’s our job now, isn’t it? To take care of the people of the Isles and restore balance.”

“It’s going to be a lot more than that,”

Troy paused, nudging me as he discreetly tilted his head toward the corner of the beer garden, where Caroline, my sixteen-year-old cousin, was sitting in the grass with a young man, drinking beer.

“Oh, she’s going to be in so much trouble!” I whispered,

stifling a laugh.

Caroline's cheeks were rosy, whether from the slight chill in the air, the alcohol, or the fact that she was snuggled up against a handsome young man, I didn't know.

"I haven't seen Vicky or Paul in hours," Troy replied, chuckling slightly to himself.

"Probably for the best, but I thought she was supposed to be watching Sarah and Kat." I looked around, not seeing a single

glimpse of my younger cousins anywhere.

"Sarah's old enough to be out by herself. She's what, thirteen?"

"We all grew up very differently than you did, Troy," I laughed. "You were a pirate at thirteen. Sarah, well, Kat is likely out there bossing poor Sarah around as we speak. Sarah's shy, you know. I don't think I saw her at all the entire time we were in Winter Forest."

Tangled myself away from Caroline, not wanting her to see us

and risk ruining her evening of freedom.

"She can definitely see us, Maeve," Troy murmured, draining his cup of cider. "You stick out, you know."

"I do not," I replied, reaching for another piece of fried chicken.

"Trust me, you do. You're beautiful; you have to know that. Everyone looks at you when you walk by."

I blushed, looking up at Troy through my lashes. He leaned down and kissed me, softly at first, and full enough to make

me feel a little warmth spread through my belly and thighs.

"Want to find a dark alley somewhere?" he growled into my ear.

"And watch you get beat up again? I don't think so!"

We spent a good hour in the beer garden before the chilly night air forced us to start moving again, this time in search of my parents and our children. I was

bursting with milk after eating my weight in food, and three or four cups of hot cider, and was thankful to see them toward the entrance of the market.

Dad was talking to Eugene, the Alpha of Red Lakes, Hanna's father. Eugene was holding several large stuffed animals in his arms, his cheeks reddened from the cold, which made him look even more jolly than he usually did.

"I'm a great shot," he said, holding up his prizes. "I see you have none, Alpha King. Here, you can have this one, it's the smallest. Better luck next time, I say—" He handed Dad a fuzzy, pink teddy bear, patting Dad on the shoulder.

Dad nodded his thanks, stifling a scowl, then looked the bear up and down before placing it on top of Charlie, who was sleeping in the stroller.

Eugene was the only man I knew who knowingly sought to rile Dad up, except for maybe Keaton; and so far, he had been unsuccessful. It didn't stop him from trying, though.

Troy had Oliver tucked in his jacket as we lingered near the

entrance to the market, Dad and Eugene were continuing their conversation, which was centered around an event taking place within a few days.

leavesdropped, growing somewhat annoyed by the length of the conversation because it was rather cold. Mom and Troy had wanted to take the train from the castle to the university center square to make a whole event of the festival, and I knew we still had a thirty-minute train ride home.

But then I heard something interesting.

"I have to go, as the king. I'm supposed to appoint her to the position"

"Who?" I asked, turning to face Dad.

"The new High Priestess," he answered shortly, shrugging. "On Tuesday."

"Like a coronation?" I pressed, genuinely curious.

"No, not quite—"

“Hanna and Rowan are to be married by her after she ascends to her new title-” Eugene interjected.

“Married?” | exclaimed, looking from Dad and Eugene to Mom. “Why is this the first time I’m hearing of this?”

“Because we’re keeping it private, Maeve. Hanna ascended to Luna of Drogomor without being officially married”

“So? Is it really that important that they are? Hell, I don’t even remember getting married, but that didn’t seem to be an issue.”

Dad colored, and not from the cold.

“We can continue this conversation on the train, Gene,” Dad motioned Eugene to follow, leaving me standing, and seething, next to the stroller with Troy and Mom.

“What’s his problem?” | grumbled, looking at Mom.

“He’s having a hard time right now, Maeve. Please don’t bother him,”

“He’s having a hard time? Aren’t we all? What makes him so special-”

“Maeve, come on.” Troy took my hand, giving me a knowing look.

“Why is he being so secretive? Do Hanna and Rowan even know they’re getting married, or is that a private matter too?”

“Maeve, sweetheart-”

“No!” I bit out, overwhelmed by sudden fury. I glared from Troy to Mom. “Are we not going to talk about what happened? Are we just supposed to forget that we all almost died? And now... now everything just goes on, like normal?”

“Yes,” Mom said sternly, her tone biting.

| swallowed back my anger for a moment, sensing I had most definitely overstepped.

She continued, “Your dad is trying to salvage our reputations with the other Alphas right now, Maeve. We spent the better part of the summer and fall

putting an army together to squash a threat that never came to fruition. He is the Alpha

King of the East, Maeve, and some of the other Alphas are starting to voice their concerns over what happened to Damian. People are asking questions.”

“So, we pretend like-”

“For Hanna’s sake, we pretend like nothing happened.” Mom pursed her lips, and I saw a momentary flash of uncertainty in her eyes, mimicking my own.

“Well, I should probably plan a bachelor party, huh?” Troy said after a moment of silence as we walked out of the festival.

I glared up at him then looked toward the figures of Dad and Eugene as they walked down the street ahead of us.

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 334

Chapter 114: Lineage of the Queens

Troy

Maeve and Ethan needed to talk; that was obvious.

Things had been tense between them since we had arrived in Winter Forest several weeks ago and had only escalated from there. The situation with Tasia and the moonstones was out of our control and only made things worse, but that was over now.

I had been trying to find a way to put Maeve in Ethan’s path, knowing the two were too bullheaded to actually find a time to hash things out on their own, but so far had been unsuccessful.

The days following our battle with Tasia had been shockingly chaotic and full, with everyone preparing to go their separate ways and start new lives.

I had seen more of Ethan and Rowan than anyone as it was, spending most of my time in the Alpha’s office in the castle pouring over maps and whatever records of Poldesse Ethan had managed to get his hands on.

Rowan was always there, doing much the same for his new pack, slightly pale as he prepared to take over the role of Alpha of Drogomor on his own once Ethan returned with Rosalie to Winter Forest.

But I got a lucky break on Saturday, just a few days before Rowan and Hanna were meant to be officially wed. Rosalie

had pulled me aside shortly after breakfast, asking if I'd be willing to go to Winter Forest with her to pack up Rowan and Maeve's belongings.

I didn't even wonder why Rosalie would ask me something like that. I knew she could have Gretchen do it and have warriors send their belongings to not only Mirage, but to Avondale.

Rosalie wanted a break from the turmoil the rift between Maeve and Ethan was causing, and I could tell she knew I was looking for an escape as well.

We landed in Winter Forest in the early morning on Sunday, meaning to be back in the air the following morning. It was meant to be a quick, calculated trip-no frills. But when we reached the port of Winter Forest, I could tell Rosalie had something else on her mind.

"I still don't know how you managed to convince Maeve that I could come with you," I said, reaching up to take her hand as I helped her out of the seaplane and onto the dock.

"It was easier than I expected, honestly. Maeve doesn't want to be carting the boys around right before you all make the long journey to the Isles. Plus, I know for a fact the last thing she wanted to do was go through all of her things. She always hated doing things like that, organizing and getting rid of things."

"Yeah, I've noticed Maeve tends to thrive in chaos," I laughed, and from there on the conversation took an easy turn into less meaningful ramblings as we walked up to the house.

"It can't be easy on you... packing up their things like this," I said softly, my footsteps crunching in the snow. It had

snowed quite a bit since we left Winter Forest, and there had been a lot of snow then. Now it clung to the top of the wall that surrounded the house.

“I knew this was coming, in one way or another. It goes by fast, you know. One day they’re little, and the next day... well, I honestly didn’t expect Maeve to find her mate so quickly. And Troy, I am glad it’s you. I hope you know that.”

I swallowed against the lump in my throat as we entered the house. It couldn’t have been easy for Rosalie to say such a thing to me. I was the son of her worst enemy, a woman who caused immense grief to Rosalie.

And now I was not only her daughter’s mate and husband, but the father of her grandchildren. Grandchildren that shared my, and my mother’s, blood.

Rosalie said nothing further as we shed our coats and boots, as we were quickly greeted by Gretchen, who was trembling with anticipation to hear the news of everything that had happened in Mirage over the past several weeks.

She ushered Rosalie through the house and into the kitchen, where their conversation faded to a low murmur. I was left alone in the foyer, unsure of whether or not to follow.

I decided to go upstairs, grabbing an armful of cardboard boxes that Gretchen had rested against the stairs.

We only had a day to prepare Rowan and Maeve for their new lives, after all.

The color of the walls in Maeve’s room was a deep violet, of course. She loved the color purple. It matched her bedspread, a thick quilt made of varying shades of purple fabric and well worn *from* years of use. I folded the quilt into a tight square, having a feeling that Maeve would want to keep it.

I’d packed up the rest of her room already, spending the better part of three hours looking through her things. I took down the pictures hanging on the walls; pictures of a younger Maeve and her friends, her parents, even a few of her and Rowan as children, and put the pictures in one of the boxes along with an assortment of books and other trinkets.

She didn’t want me to pack any of her clothes, begrudgingly saying nothing would fit her anymore, so I left her dresser untouched and instead moved on to the bedside tables.

I smiled to myself as I opened one of the drawers, suddenly remembering the first day Maeve spent on the Persephone.

She had torn my room apart, looking in every drawer and cabinet. She had pulled the drawers of the bedside table out of the table completely, dumping the meager contents on the bed.

Then, she had fallen asleep, and when I came to check on her a few hours later, I found her curled around the contents of the drawer, her face stained with tears.

I'd felt awful. I hadn't known what to do. I was convinced at that moment that I had lost her forever. But little did I know what was in store for me.

I sat on the edge of her bed and looked down at the journal in my hands. It was her's, well-loved and often used, from what I

could tell. I kept it closed but ran my fingers over the cover where she had carved her name in the leather.

If she had found a journal of mine, she would, without a doubt, have opened it and read it. But I chose to put it into the last of the boxes I needed to pack and then taped the box shut.

"Hey," Rosalie said from the doorway, gingerly stepping inside with two mugs of fragrant, milky tea in her hands.

"Hey, I think this is it-" I motioned toward the now empty room, save for the bare furniture. She nodded, taking a deep breath as she looked around. She handed me the tea, then leaned against the doorway, a glimmer of tears in her eyes.

"When she went to Drogomor to rule alongside Ernest, I... I don't know. It didn't feel final. I always thought Ethan would change his mind, and she would come home."

"Why did Ethan want to send Maeve to Mirage, exactly? || never really understood the reasoning."

Rosalie exhaled deeply, then sighed as she looked around the room once more. "We'd been able to rule over Valoria with relative ease for two decades, even with Ethan here with me in Winter Forest. Georgia and Talon did a fine job as Alpha and Luna of Drogomor, for a while, but Georgia was restless.

“When Talon broached the subject of passing on his title to Ernest, it caused a bit of a rift between Ethan and the High Elder Council. They weren’t too keen on a seventeen-year-old becoming the Alpha of Drogomor, but Ethan convinced them otherwise.

“It wasn’t until Ernest refused to find a Luna for Drogomor that the arrangement became an issue.” She sat on the edge of the bed, cupping her hands around her mug of tea.

“Some packs elect their Alphas, you know. The Elders of Valoria were worried about something like that happening to the Drogomor line if Ernest didn’t produce an heir. Ernest dug his heels in, saying he would resign-”

“He did that anyway. Why not just send Rowan to Mirage to be Alpha?”

“Ethan will never admit it, Troy. And please, do not repeat this but... he wasn’t ready to let Rowan go. Sending Rowan to Mirage to be Alpha of Drogomor was the expected choice. He was Ethan’s heir, the rightful Alpha by birthright, and he was several years older than Ernest as well. But Ethan just wouldn’t do it. And when it came down to it, he chose to send Maeve instead.”

“Why? Maeve’s situation was... much worse, if I’m being blunt-”

“I know. And I disagreed wholeheartedly with it, but Maeve wanted to go. She wanted it more than anything. Maeve would be White Queen one day; she would come home to us when her time in Mirage was at an end.

“But Rowan? He would’ve remained forever in Mirage. And Ethan wasn’t ready for that. That’s all it came down to. He let one of our children go, one that would come back, so the other could remain.”

“It’s archaic, Rosalie,” I said, unable to hide the bitter edge to my voice.

She nodded, agreeing with me. “We raised them differently than how we were raised, Troy. But it didn’t change the fact that this is the world we live in. Heirs, lines, lineages... politics. We can’t escape it as royals. Your sons won’t be able to escape it, either. Triplet sons in line for succession... it’s a lot to think about, to consider.”

“We have many years,” I replied.

The discussion died, and I took a drink of my tea, looking around the room. Rosalie did the same. After a moment of somber silence, I spoke again, asking the question that had been nagging me since I left for Winter Forest with Rosalie.

“Did Hanna tell you about her visions of the white-haired girl?”

Rosalie nodded, her eyes widening. “Can you imagine?”

“Not if what Hanna believes her to be is correct.”

“I have something to show you,” Rosalie said as she rose to her feet. “Come with me. Gretchen is making dinner, and I have some loose ends to tie up this evening before we go back to Mirage, but....” she trailed off, her voice fading as she moved into the hallway, beckoning for me to follow.

Before I knew it, I was suited up for a short walk to the castle grounds. The castle was quiet, like usual, no more than the occasional footsteps and hushed voices of warriors passing by.

Rosalie led me into the library, the same room where Ernest had relinquished his title of Alpha and the old Lycennian woman had warned us of times to come.

The library took on a new air of peace and tranquility with it just being Rosalie and I inside its walls, however. She was on a mission, and she quickly crossed the room, scanning one of

the ceiling height bookshelves.

I lingered near the hearth, thankful for the warmth. I had never experienced cold quite like that before, so dry and biting it was painful on my skin, even with layers of clothes on.

“I don’t know why I didn’t think of this before,” she murmured, pulling a large, leather bound book from the shelf. She walked over to me, looking down at its unmarked cover.

“What is it?” I asked as she set it down on the coffee table near the hearth, motioning for me to sit as she opened it, fanning through what looked like thousands of pages, yellowed and crinkled with age.

“A history of this region, of the White Queens in particular. When the wall of the White Queen’s temple was destroyed, the one with the names of the previous White Queens etched into the granite, I thought that knowledge had been lost-oh, here it is. I haven’t looked at this book in many years.”

She blew on the book, and the dust that had settled between the pages burst into the air and fluttered down. It was nearing dark, but only 2:00 in the afternoon, and the speckles of dust seemed to float in the faint, golden sunset coming through the tall stained glass windows.

I looked down at the page, seeing a family tree.

“Oh, wow. This is everyone?”

“Everyone before my great grandmother’s time as White

Queen, I believe. That’s her name there, Loralyn. I knew this was here, this tree, but never even looked at it. I don’t know why, maybe I just... didn’t want to know. The last time I looked at this book was to try and find a way to save Ethan when... well, this is how I found out about the Moonlight Lily.”

I was careful not to touch the page as I followed the tree down toward the base of the trunk. Morrighan’s name was written cleanly in neat, legible scrawl at the bottom of the page, where the tree met with the ground.

Hundreds of branches sprouted from the base of the tree, heavy with names-names of mates, names of siblings, of aunts and uncles. But the names of the White Queens were written in bold, sometimes in a separate color, and it was plain that additions had been made to this page over the centuries. I looked up at the top of the page once more, settling my gaze on Loralyn’s name, then traveled down.

Loralyn, Adelaide, Henrietta, Mary, Catherine, and so on.

But then I saw it, and a strange feeling crept over me as I stared down at the page, my heart tightening in my chest.

Maeve.

She was the daughter of Alouette.

“Oh,” I said weakly, unable to take my eyes away from the tree.

“Ethan chose Maeve’s name. He wouldn’t have known about this. The names that used to be in the temple didn’t go this far back,” Rosalie said quietly, her voice choked with emotion.

“It must mean something, right?” I looked past Alouette to her

mother’s name, Onya, which was written above it. Alouette had been her only child.

“Maybe, but it’s likely we’ll never know the significance. But look here, can you see this name? It’s written so small I can barely see it myself-”

Next to Alouette’s name was a mark connecting her to her mate, where more lines created the branches of the children they had together. My eye’s widened as I looked down at Callum’s name. They had been together, at some point in time, to go on to have three more children together after their Maeve was born.

“But how? The records of Valoria cleared stated Alouette had born a son for King Hector-”

“I wish I knew,” Rosalie sighed, sinking into the couch opposite mine. “Maybe she had her daughter with Callum before bearing a son for King Hector, and then reunited with Callum later in her life.”

“... thank you for showing me this,” I whispered, unable to make sense of the emotions I felt as I looked down at the page once more, reading the names that came after Alouette and Maeve the First.

Maeve had a daughter named Juniper, who had a daughter named Clarissa. Elizabeth followed, then Marianne, Georgiana, Gwen, Juliette, and Eloise. I traced a line through the names, meeting with Loralyn once again.

“We should add your names to the book,” I said, meeting Rosalie’s eyes. “There was no break in the line like we thought.”

“I wonder what that means for Rowan and Hanna,” she replied, pursing her lips. “Have you wondered if maybe the girl isn’t Hanna’s daughter but Maeve’s?”

“Maeve won’t even think of having another child, Rosalie,” I said softly, gently closing the book. “Plus, Rowan is part of this family tree. The male offspring

were listed as well... that means something, I believe. The powers of the White Queen pass to all descendants in one way or another. They have to.”

I rose from the couch and took the book back to its rightful place, looking around to mesmerize the layout of the shelf for future reference.

“Do you think Maeve will be a White Queen one day?” I asked without meaning to say it out loud. I colored, refusing to turn to face Rosalie.

“Yes, I do. But she’s not ready. Not now. Not for some time. Do you remember what the old woman from Lycenna said? That Maeve’s powers would be... immense, is how I took it.”

“I do,” I replied, turning around.

“I think she’ll be a powerful White Queen, Troy, when her time comes. But Maeve still needs to learn who she is, before she knows what she can do.”

I swallowed, crossing my arms over my chest.

“Not what you were expecting from a mate, right?” Rosalie said with a little laugh, her blue eyes glistening in the light of the hearth.

“I knew I was in for it the first time I saw her, Rosalie.” I smiled, shaking my head.

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 335

Chapter 115: Other Forces at Work

Maeve

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat on one of the long, marble pews in the temple of the Moon Goddess in Mirage, staring over my shoulder at the small crowd of onlookers who had gathered to witness Tempest, the new High Priestess, be ordained as the leader of the Church.

I’d only ever been to the small services held at the temple in Winter Forest, and those were few and far between, as I could rarely be bothered to sit still long enough to pay attention without fidgeting like mad.

Today was no different.

Troy had returned from Winter Forest the day before, and we were officially counting down the days until we boarded the Persephone once again to head to Avondale, which would happen within the next week.

Neither of us had wanted to go to the ceremony to see Tempest, who we had never met, become the High Priestess, but Lynus had insisted that we both attend, since it was likely Troy would be working closely with the High Elder Council for some time to come.

Better Tempest be an ally, than a stranger.

I was unsure about my feelings toward the Church after the whole Grace incident. In fact, none of us were entirely sure what had happened to Grace after the battle with Tasia.

AUDIVUL

Hanna said she hadn't been in the cavern, but the rest of us hadn't seen her leave through the tunnel, either. She and Carl had just disappeared, it seemed!

I stifled a yawn as the elderly priestess preaching a sermon rattled on. She looked like she was over a hundred years old, from my perspective. Even Tempest, a fair woman with thin, blonde hair and glossy green eyes, looked bored, but she had been forced to stand behind the old woman while holding a large book in one hand, and a scroll in the other.

I met Tempest's gaze for a moment, and to my surprise, she gave me a soft, knowing smile before inhaling deeply and turning back to the crowd, blinking several times to stop the rush of fatigue threatening to put us all to sleep from overpowering her.

Troy nudged me gently as I began to nod my head, unable to keep my eyes open.

"How much longer is this going to take?" | yawned, narrowing my eyes at him.

"Tempest is going to marry Rowan and Hanna, and then it's over," Troy replied in a hushed whisper as a few people turned to stare in our direction.

And he was right. After a few minutes more of the elder's monotonous speech, Tempest stepped forward. A silly hat was placed on her head, and

she twirled in a circle twice and unraveled the scroll, signing her name at the bottom.

“And they think White Queens are weird,” I murmured,

slouching in the pew. “What the hell was that?”

Troy shrugged, trying not to laugh.

The crowd who had gathered to watch the sermon began to leave the temple, but we stayed behind with my parents, Lynus, and Alpha Eugene. Eugene was jolly as ever, very excited to see Hanna wed.

Thad noticed Eugene more and more around the castle, and quite often in Hanna’s presence. They seemed happy, but based on what Rowan had told me about his time in Red Lakes, I wondered what exactly had shifted between Eugene and Hanna. He had been fearful of her at one point. Even embarrassed.

Talon, Georgia, Vicky, and Paul came into the temple, greeting the rest of us as they sat down on the pews. Ernest and Gemma came in behind the rest of the family, followed by Kacidra and Pete.

Goddess, I felt like I hadn’t seen Pete in years. He and Kacidra were thoroughly taken with each other, and he hadn’t had a second to spare for anyone else.

They were staying in Mirage while the rest of us were at the castle, and he hadn’t even known about what happened with Tasia until several days later. It didn’t seem to bother him in the slightest. All was right in his world; he had found the one thing he’d always been looking for-Kacidra.

Notably absent was Aaron of Red Lakes.

Hanna and Rowan were ushered out of a side door, both of them looking slightly sheepish and uncomfortable. Hanna was wearing a silky, cream colored dress with a rabbit fur coat, her hair pulled away from her face in a long braid. She looked

beautiful.

Rowan looked as though he'd rather be doing anything else. To the rest of the family, this was their wedding, but I knew better. Troy had told me Rowan and Hanna had eloped when they reached Mirage, before the conference, and when Hanna showed up with a ring on her finger at the Gala, Dad put the pieces together and made her stand on stage and be crowned Luna.

Neither of them had wanted a big, flashy wedding.

I'd been teasing Troy about having a big wedding to make up for the fact I had no memory of my own, and he had agreed that we should do it up right. I wondered if my parents would be opposed to us having the reception on the Persephone, a thought that gave me much pleasure and brought a smirk to my face.

Dad had been through hell and back a few times in his life, but he was still a traditionalist.

I turned to look at him as Rowan and Hanna stepped in front of Tempest, and I noticed the tension leave Dad's shoulders a fraction of an inch as Tempest began to recite the ceremonial rites that would bind Rowan and Hanna together as husband, wives, and mates.

"Why didn't they ask you to do it?" | whispered to Mom, leaning around Troy to see her better.

Mom shushed me, then shrugged, tilting her head toward Dad. Dad was watching the ceremony with interest, but his arms were crossed over his chest, his body rigid with tension.

Pleaned back in the pew, tapping my fingers on the seat.

Rowan pecked Hanna on the mouth, his cheeks coloring as some of the family members clapped. It was very unromantic, but I didn't expect anything else from them. Rowan and Hanna were both shy, private people. Kissing in front of our entire family must have been mortifying.

The ceremony was quick, and Rowan seemed pleased to have it over with. He held Hanna's hand as the family stood and gathered around them, showering them with congratulations.

But I felt someone touch my elbow, and I turned to see Tempest standing next to me, tilting her head toward an empty corner of the room.

I glanced at Troy and my parents, who were not paying attention to either me or Tempest, and I followed her out of the fray.

“I wanted to introduce myself formally to you in particular,” she said, her voice shockingly deep compared to her appearance. She was a beautiful, but dainty, woman who was likely a few years older than Gemma, but she had a deep, whisky voice. “I am called Tempest in the church, but my given name is Monica.”

“Uhm, I’m Maeve,” I nodded in greeting, lacking the business like social graces my mother exuded. I wasn’t sure how I was supposed to greet her, having grown up outside of the Church of the Moon Goddess and their practices.

“I know,” she said with a little laugh, smiling gently. “I am pleased to finally meet you. I could tell you were just as bored as I was during my ascension ceremony. It’s an outdated

practice. In all honesty, I’ve been doing the duties of the High Priestess for a long while. Grace had her positive attributes, of course, but she let a lot slide I’m afraid.”

“You can say that again,” I snorted, shaking my head. “I’m sure you’re well aware of what happened.”

“Yes. Your father told me everything. I can assure you the Church has no need for the moonstones. Those belong to the White Queens and should be housed in your temple, not ours. But I wanted to speak to you alone, for a moment, before your family departs.”

“About what?”

“You and I are close in age. It’s likely, unless the Goddess has other plans for me, that I will be High Priestess when you come into your title of White Queen in the future, a distant one I hope, but still.

“It’s important to me that I not only mend the rift between our two churches, but also work to eliminate the stigma the Church places on the White Queens. You are not pagans or witches; of that I am certain.

“If anything, the Church should be following the practices of the White Queens more intently, and that is something I hope will happen in the future.”

“I’m not a White Queen yet,” I replied, shrugging my shoulders. “And I have a feeling I won’t be for a long time, so I don’t know what I can do for you-”

“I’m not asking for anything but an understanding that I am not like my predecessor,” she said under her breath, meeting

my eyes. “I want a union, not a rift.”

“I mean, I’m okay with it-”

“And since I’m now on the High Elder Council, I will be working closely with you while you assimilate to life in the Isles. There is much to be done. But, Maeve... |-” she closed the distance between us, her eyes downcast as she murmured, “listen. Tasia failed because there are other forces at work. I can’t... now is not the time to explain-”

“Maeve!” Mom called out to me, motioning me over. Everyone was starting to funnel out of the temple, ready to catch the train to the castle where a dinner party was being held in Rowan and Hanna’s honor.

“We will speak again, at a later time. Hanna, too,” Tempest said quickly, nodding a farewell before she turned on her heel and walked briskly away. I gaped, a chill shooting up my spine. Why did I feel like this wasn’t over?

“Maeve, come on!” Troy bellowed, his voice echoing through the temple.

I looked around, finding myself alone.

The whole damn family was packed onto the train like sardines. I fidgeted in my seat next to Troy, my breasts full and aching with milk.

I was looking forward to making our way to Poldesse, enjoying a week-long ride on the Persephone with the babies instead of the never-ending social engagement I’d be

subjected to while we stayed at the castle.

I missed the boys, and I had never felt so out of control of my own schedule in my life.

Kat, Vicky's youngest daughter, was throwing an absolute hissy fit toward the end of the train car, wailing on her older sister with her fists while Paul did his best to drag the angry little demon away.

Vicky looked annoyed, giving the little girl a stern, motherly glance, but had her attention fixed on a conversation taking place between Georgia, my mom, and Gemma.

Troy was fast asleep, his head against the window.

I looked around, taking in the faces of my family. Everyone was happy. *We* were all together. I wondered when it would be like this again.

The train pulled into the station after a thirty-minute ride to Old Town Drogomor. We disembarked and walked as a group through the quiet main street, the castle of Drogomor rising up in the distance.

Troy was walking just ahead of me, flanked by Rowan and Ernest, the three of them jovial in easy conversation.

I sighed, hugging my arms around myself, trying to find some peace in solitude.

I wanted to feel like things were going to be easy again, that I would feel normal. But after my quest, my journey through the pass, finding the moonstones...

"Hey, kid," Dad said softly behind me, catching up to me and

keeping in step. I turned to him, surprised he wasn't walking ahead of me with the rest of the family. "*We* need to talk."

Read Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder novel Chapter 336

Chapter 116: Are We Missing Something?

Maeve

The castle was buzzing with activity. Dinner had been served buffet style, and everyone was congregating in the formal dining hall where the ball had taken place.

But I found myself in the library, which was quiet and empty, save for my dad.

He was standing in front of one of the windows, a dram of scotch in his hand. He looked meditative, but his brow was furrowed.

“Hey,” I said, closing the door behind me. “You wanted to talk to me?”

He turned from the window, nodding, and motioned for me to sit. I felt a sudden wave of unease, wondering if I was in trouble for something.

“I just wanted... I just wanted to say I’m sorry, Maeve-”

“For what? What could you possibly be sorry for?” I was dumbfounded, but I could tell something was troubling him greatly.

He sat down on one of the couches in front of the hearth and sighed, bringing the scotch to his lips before thinking better of it. He lowered his glass as I sat on the opposite couch.

“Is this about the moonstones? Dad, you couldn’t have known-”

“I knew enough to not send you to Valoria in the first place.”

“When I came to live with Ernest?”

“Yes,” he lowered his gaze, swirling the scotch in his glass. “It was wrong of me to put that kind of expectation on you-”

“I wanted to do it. You didn’t have to convince me-”

“I should have handled the situation without involving you. I should have put Rowan in Ernest’s place. It wasn’t your responsibility to carry the weight of our family’s obligations, Maeve. It was mine.”

“Dad-”

He looked up at me through his lashes, the fire in the hearth reflecting off his irises. He looked very young at that moment, and for a second I caught a glimpse of what Mom must have seen when she was my age, just getting to know my Dad for the first time.

I couldn’t imagine. Even their stories of that time couldn’t explain the full scope of what it must have been like for them.

I was in love, and able to show it. Troy and I fit together like a puzzle piece. We had always been able to communicate clearly and efficiently, and I didn't realize that until trying to navigate my relationship with my father.

Dad was an enigma, totally and utterly impossible to read.

"I accept your apology," I said, even though it felt like a lie. I had no reason to accept an apology from him. He had done nothing wrong. He only felt like he had. "I'm sorry too. For causing you so much stress."

- He looked at me blankly for a moment, then snorted with mirth, shaking his head.

"I think I owe Troy an apology next," he smiled, taking a long swig of his scotch.

"Troy? Why?"

"For putting up with you. I didn't think anyone would be up for the job."

I scowled, leaning back against the couch cushions.

"I'm kidding," he said after a moment, "I only meant that... it would have taken a certain type of man to deserve you,

Maeve. I didn't think one existed."

"I bet you didn't think it would be your arch nemesis's son, either. Did you?"

His eyes darkened for a split second. He drained his scotch, then shook his head.

"Call it karma for all my past transgressions."

Thuffed, smiling to myself.

"I leave in the morning with your mother, Georgia, and Talon. Ernest and Gemma too-*

"I know. We catch the nine o'clock train to the Port of Val oria. We set sail close to sundown, I believe."

A silence passed between us. The time had come after many weeks. I had already left my family once, but this felt so much more final.

"I'll come to visit," I said, trying to smile to stop myself from crying. "Troy says autumn is a terrible time to be in the Isles.... Hurricanes, can you believe it?"

"You'll be just in time to see the last of the fireweed blooms if you come in early August," he said soberly, a flash of sadness in his eyes.

"And you and mom can visit every winter, in January... when it's negative thirty and windy everyday."

"We will. I promise you."

I looked at him, searching his face, seeing lines of fatigue and of surrender. I was going away for good this time, starting a life of my own, on my own terms. Rowan was the new Alpha of Drogomor and would be living here now with Hanna and his future children.

I realized, selfishly and for the first time, how big of a change this was for my own parents.

Trose from the couch and went to him, sitting down next to him. I exhaled deeply, then leaned into him as he wrapped his arm around my shoulder.

"I'm proud of you, Maeve," he whispered.

I could hear the smile in his voice.

"Thanks, Dad."

"Well, we're building a house just outside of the village. Something small and cozy, you know, maybe a bit smaller than what Rosalie and Ethan have. But, I think we need to plan for at least four bedrooms because, well, Gemma and Ernest will

definitely have another baby. I'd like to have a playroom at our house too-" Georgia was chattering away, her eyes alight with excitement as she spilled her desires for the future to Vicky, who was listening earnestly to every word.

Vicky looked slightly overwhelmed, having been in the background for all of the drama of the last several weeks, but was doing her best.

She and Paul were leaving for Breles with their daughters in the morning, taking the same train as Troy and I. We'd be riding to the port together, but they would immediately board a ferry to take them straight to Breles, rather than the Isles.

The dining room was filled with conversation and music. Gemma was dancing with George in her arms, who was screaming with laughter as his mom twirled in a circle, keeping in rhythm with the piano. Mom was playing something upbeat and happy, and it lightened the somber mood significantly, giving our goodbyes a sweeter taste.

I was holding Charlie, who was wide awake. He was peering over the top of my shoulder, chomping lazily on my dress. Troy was walking around with Will in his arms, the boy fast asleep, while Dad had Oliver, of course, resting against his chest as he sat in a high-backed chair next to the piano.

I looked around, remembering how quiet and lonely the castle had once been, back when it was only me, Ernest, and Gemma in residence.

I regretted not knowing the details of their early relationship, wishing I'd had the wherewithal to notice the small details I had missed. They had been in love from the beginning, and I was so thankful they now had the chance to be together like they deserved.

And thank the Goddess for George.

I patted Charlie on the back as I walked around the room, stopping to talk to Pete for a moment. He was planning to stay in Mirage for a while with Kacidra. They were getting married next summer, when his mother could join them in Valoria. He no doubt thought he was the luckiest man alive, and I could see the joy in his eyes when he glanced over at Kacidra, who was talking with Georgia and Vicky.

I was just about to head back over to the piano when a warrior hurried into the room, his face pale and his eyes searching for Dad. He found him, and walked between the group congregated in the center of the dining room without saying a word. He walked right up to Dad and placed a letter in his hand.

Dad looked down at the note, his face undergoing an incredible transformation. He slowly rose to his feet.

Mom noticed the exchange, and she took her hands from the piano keys, looking at Dad with a quizzical expression on his face.

49er “Everything’s fine, just business,” he said, loud enough for the entire gathering to hear. But I could tell by the way he furrowed his brow that something was bothering him immensely.

He put Oliver in Mom’s arms and bent to whisper something in her ear, then he crossed the room, exiting through the doors and disappearing into the hallway. I looked around, setting my gaze on Troy, who had just watched the whole exchange.

“Come with me,” Mom said, her voice shaking slightly. I nodded, following Mom out of the dining room. Troy was behind us as we reached the hallway, his voice a low hiss.

“What’s going on?”

“I don’t-”

“The warriors know where Carl went,” Mom said quickly, her voice unreadable.

“What? Where?” I asked, shocked.

She turned to me, her eyes shining in the dimly lit hallway.

“He went to the Isles, and then... South.”

“But if he went south... Dad, there’s nothing done there anymore, Dianny is gone... There’s only the tomb. Where could

he have possibly gone?”

“I don’t know, Maeve. I’m just as confused as you are. He was spotted leaving Papeno in a cruiser, alone.”

“I thought, if he had survived what happened in the cavern... he would have gone north, to find the other refugees, Opaline-” Troy interjected.

Troy was right, the refugees from Lycenna had gone north. To where, the old woman, Hanna's great aunt, hadn't said.

And they had taken Opaline with them.

"He would have gone after Opaline, surely," I added, my skin prickling with gooseflesh as I said her name. "Are you sure it was him?"

"He's not hard to miss. I think we missed something here," Dad said to himself as he paced back and forth along the far wall of the atrium. "Something isn't quite right about this. You said the tomb was part of an ancient city, correct? A pack long gone? What business would he have there?"

"Well, he left the pack lands, right? He's gone. There was nothing else in the tomb besides some gold... we don't have anything to worry about now, do we?" I asked. I was nursing Will and Oliver, settled on the couch near the hearth.

"You said you thought we were missing something," Troy said. He was leaning against one of the bookshelves, mulling the situation over in his mind. "Like... another pack, maybe, a pack like Lycenna?"

"Possibly, I don't know for sure. We didn't know about Lycenna and Dianny until recently-"

"It's entirely possible;" Mom said softly, careful not to raise her voice above a whisper as Oliver lounged drowsily in her arms.

"Well, he has no allies. Lycenna is gone, from what we know. The refugees left with no interest in returning," I continued, feeling increasingly uneasy. "Wherever Carl is going... he'll be alone."

No one spoke for a moment. I cleared my throat, looking down at my boys. Nothing else mattered to me.

"It's over," I said with conviction. "He's gone. It's over."

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