

## **Kings Breeder 491**

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 491

\*Soren\*

Hugging my unconscious Ciana tightly, I picked her up, trying to steady her trembling body. Her eyes were closed, a look of extreme pain on her face. It was pouring rain, the wind howling, whipping through the trees of the forest, soaking all of us.

The king's Beta, Jake, along with six others had arrived almost the same time as us. From the way they moved, all top warriors.

The young king uttered. "Thank you, Alpha and Luna Black."

"Let's find someplace dry," my wife suggested. I nodded.

"We can use the secret tunnel that Ciana and I found when we were here last time.

Jake, lead the way, I'll tell you where to go." Theo's voice was weak, but just enough for us to hear him through the downpour.

He was in obvious pain and his face twisted slightly. As he spoke, his body was weakened by the loss of blood. I could see the stark white of his shirt, now stained a deep red by the stab wound in his chest. I was worried that if we didn't get him medical attention soon, he might not make it.

Jake quickly called for one of Theo's warriors, who shifted into his wolf form. The Beta gently helped his king up and got him onto the warrior's back. I followed behind with my daughter in my arms and my wife by my side as we made our way through the pouring rain.

Ciana's face seemed to be turning more pale by the moment.

"She is going to be okay," I assured my wife, who was almost as pale as our daughter.

She nodded and whispered, "Yes, she'll be okay," as if she was sending positive thoughts and prayers for our baby girl to the universe.

I knew the tunnel Theo spoke of. It would provide us with the shelter we desperately needed. On my many travels looking to open the portal between the Realm of Shadow and the Realm of Light, I'd discovered just about every secret this kingdom had to offer, but I hadn't realized it was so close.

It didn't take us too long to get there, but when we did, Theo had also passed out.

The tunnel was narrow and dark, its walls slick with moisture. The air was musty and damp, and I could hear the sound of dripping water echoing off the stone walls. A few other wolves followed us at a distance, their panting breaths and soft footsteps blending together in the darkness. Since Jake didn't seem to be concerned, I had to assume that these were also Theo's men.

At one of the intersections that lead to four different directions, Jake hesitated. It was obvious that he hadn't been here before and Theo wasn't there to direct him.

‘This way,’ I told the group. Jake was a little surprised, but he respected my privacy and didn’t ask why I was so confident about a secret tunnel within the Ortiz pack.

Everyone else followed without questioning as well.

It was quiet and I led the group turning and twisting through the endless underground pathways.

‘Hang on, sweetie, almost there,’ I murmured.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, we came to a small alcove, where we could rest for a few moments. I carefully laid Ciana down, assessing her wounds. I couldn’t see what was wrong with her physically.

‘It’s her mind,’ my wife shook her head and said quietly. ‘If this is a curse, I’m afraid there’s not much we can do.’

‘There has to be. On the way here, Alpha gave me some more information over the mindlink before he passed out,’ Jake said while he tended to Theo, doing his best to stop the bleeding.

After cleaning Theo’s wound, Jake continued, ‘Ciana stabbed him. Knowing her, she would never have done such a thing had she been in her right mind. It was almost like someone had not only modified her memory, but also forced their emotions and wishes on her. Something that may be done using the Moonlit Crystal.’

My heart sank. Damn it!

I should’ve kept a closer eye on her back home. If I had, none of this would happen!

‘It’s all my fault!’ I looked at my wife, and clenched my fists, ‘I’m so sorry, honey, I should’ve protected our little girl better! Damn it, what the fuck was I thinking letting her go to the woods by herself!’

She placed a hand on mine and squeezed it. ‘Honey, self-blaming is not going to solve anything right now. Our girl needs you to be calm to help her.’

My mate was right. I took a couple of deep breaths in. I needed to find a way to get her help, but now that Ciana was not in immediate danger, all of us turned our attention to the other unconscious person, who seemingly was more severely wounded.

‘How’s the king?’ I asked Jake, not wanting to tear my eyes away from my daughter but I needed to check on her victim, and potentially her love. ‘What can we do to help?’

‘Alpha should be okay, thank goodness,’ Jake replied, and then he showed us something stuck at the tip of the dagger. ‘It was a little better than we thought, thanks to this.’

I was relieved to hear that Theo was alive. It was difficult for me to see what I was looking at from this angle.

‘What is that thing?’ I asked, gesturing at the object he was holding in Jake’s hand.

‘It’s a lapel pin,’ he replied. ‘Thank the goddess it was there so that the dagger couldn’t go right through his heart! Had it not been there, I don’t know how he would survive the blow. With his strong bloodline, hopefully he can make it through in a few days.’

“Thank the Goddess!” my wife said a prayer.

“A lapel pin?” I repeated. I wanted to ask something, but I bit my tongue. I didn’t want to sound rude to the king, especially when his almost-fatal injury was caused by my own daughter.

But still, who the hell would wear a lapel pin under his shirt?

Looking at the object more closely, I saw that it looked like something a child would make, with strange objects adorning the front. Maybe it was a gift from his nephew?

“This lapel pin was a gift from Ciana,” Jake explained to me.

Immediately, I felt bad for having such critical thoughts of the craft now. Now that I took a second look at it, it didn’t look all that bad. It just looked... unique.

Alright, admittedly, making trinkets and knick-knacks was not exactly my daughter’s forte.

Jake continued, “His Majesty has been wearing it whenever Ciana isn’t around him. It’s like solace for him. That way he always has something from Ciana that’s closest to his heart.”

I was at a loss for words for a moment.

When I met with the young king at the palace, he asked for my permission to court Ciana. I told him I would need to think about it, but perhaps Theo did truly love her. It wasn’t just a romantic whim of a king.

Everything that occurred tonight reminded me a bit of how Ethan loved Rosalie. My brother was a tough Alpha, much like the dark prince, but Rosalie had found a way to melt his icy exterior. Was this the same way that my Ciana had affected the Dark King?

I let out a sigh and told Theo in a voice that only I could hear, “Your Majesty, when you recover, you have my blessing to court Ciana Black.”

‘Alpha Black, what did you say?’ Jake was confused.

“Nothing,” I chuckled bitterly. If Theo heard it, I hoped that it at least would give him something to look forward to.

I turned my attention back to Ciana’s unconscious form, took her hand in mine and whispered, ‘Ciana, my darling girl. I’m so sorry that you have to go through all of this. But I promise you, I will do everything in my power to keep you safe and protect you from harm.’

I sat with Ciana, holding her hand and watching over her as she rested, praying that she would wake up soon and be okay.

“Alpha and Luna Black,” Jake asked. “What shall we do about Ciana’s situation?”

Sighing, my wife tried to explain to him what the problem was. “Her body, mind, and soul have gone through too much lately,” she replied. “She’s lost blood, life essence, and now her memory has been modified. It’s out of our ability to cure her.”

Jake's eyes widened and his brow furrowed, "But Luna Black, there must be something we could do. When King Theo wakes up, if he finds out that Ciana is still sick like this, I guarantee you he'll lose his mind!"

I tried to make it sound more positive. "There is only one person I can think of who has the power and knowledge to heal Ciana's mind and restore her memories, but it's not easy to get to her..."

Before I could finish my sentence, one of the warriors ran in. 'Look at this, Beta Jake!' he said, holding a small object out. 'I found it on the forest floor near Ciana.'

It was a Moon Stone. I recognized it immediately. Where had she gotten her hands on this?

"A Moon Stone." I took the gem from the warrior. I'd been resting on the floor with Ciana's head on my lap, so I gently laid her down.

'Moonlit Crystal,' Jake said at the same time.

We both paused for a moment. Then Jake asked me, "Why did you call it a Moon Stone?"

'Because—' I opened my mouth to answer him but then all of a sudden, the rock started to glow in rainbow colors and illuminated the nearby area.

My eyes widened, and I looked at my wife. This was the sign we'd been looking for for years. This was a sign that a portal to the Realm of Light was nearby!

"Whatever it's called is not important," I bounced up and urged, 'What's important is that I may be able to take Ciana to get help now!'

When the Moon Stone was glowing in rainbow colors, it would lead us to the White Queen.

I told the young king that I was blessed by the White Queen, but I never told him that the White Queen Rosalie was my sister-in-law, who was mated to my brother Ethan.

It had been so long since I'd been back to my homeland. Was everyone back home doing all right? I wonder whether Rosalie was still the White Queen, or had she passed the crown down to her daughter Maeve?

My beautiful wife came to my side. She took off the ring on her hand and put it on Ciana's index finger. With all the tenderness and faith in the world, she said, 'Take care of Ciana, and come back to me.'

I pulled her in for a kiss, pressed my forehead against hers and assured her, "I will, my love."

Immediately, the Beta snapped to attention and offered, "Alpha Black, if you tell me where this person is, I'll arrange the fastest transportation."

But I shook my head. "No, you can't.'

Jake pleaded, "Please allow me to help, this is the least we could do.'

I smirked, "No, not that. Because the only person who can help Ciana is the White Queen."

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 492

Rosalie\*

Sitting in my cozy cabin in Winter Forest, I glanced out the window at the beautiful scenery around us. The snow was falling softly, adding to the peaceful atmosphere inside. Big fluffy flakes gently swirled through the air as they danced their way to the ground. The white blanket that covered the ground outside was pristine and untouched, except for the tracks of the occasional animal.

The room we were in was small but warm and inviting, much cozier than the castle I used to live in here in Winter Forest. The walls were made of wood, painted a deep red color that matched the braided rug on the floor.

It was getting dark outside, but the family room was bright. A fireplace made of stone took up one wall, and a fire was crackling happily inside, casting a warm glow over the room.

"I love these family gatherings," I said, sighing contentedly. 'It's so nice to be all together, especially during the winter solstice.'

"I agree. Mom," Maeve said from her seat nearby. "It's a nice change from our annual reunion at Avondale. While that was fun for a few years, I really do miss seeing snow during winter.'

Troy gave his wife a kiss on the cheek before he sat down. "I bet you'll miss the beach in about three days.'

My daughter laughed, "Oh, I'm sure I will, but right now, nothing beats a sip of warm cocoa by the fireplace.'

Rowan and Hannah sat next to one another on a smaller couch across from Maeve, their fingers interlaced. I sighed contentedly, 'There's nothing like being surrounded by loved ones to make you feel warm and fuzzy inside.'

Ethan and I built this house when Maeve and Rowan were just kids. We had so many memories of their adventures together in the woods nearby. Sometimes it was still hard for me to believe that Maeve and Rowan were all grown up and had children of their own.

My husband sat by my side, holding my hand as we reminisced about the old days. It was hard to believe how fast the grandkids were growing. I could hear Maeve's three boys playing upstairs in one of the larger bedrooms, along with their cousin, Selene, who had turned eight not long ago.

"Here," Ethan said, raising his mug of cocoa in a toast. 'To family, the greatest gift of all."

We all clinked our mugs together and took a sip of the warm, chocolatey drink.

"Speaking of family," Maeve seemed to suddenly think of something, 'I forgot to tell you that Selene said something interesting. It was last year, around the same time when you guys came to Avondale."

Immediately, she got all the attention in the room, especially from Hannah. Maeve gave Hannah an assuring smile, "Don't worry, nothing bad.'

Troy's brow slightly creased, it was obvious that he also remembered that incident. Maeve continued, 'Selene said someone who looked like her grandpa was coming home. Dad, I could only think of one person who looks like you and is similar in age as you."

That was when a loud knock at the door startled all of us. I looked up to see Ethan had already gotten out of his chair to answer it.

Who would be visiting us at this odd hour?

The rest of us got to the door just in time to watch Ethan's face go pale and he took a step backward, shock written all over his features. I couldn't see who was at the door from where I was, but I heard Ethan's gasp.

"Soren?" Ethan muttered in disbelief. "Is that really you?"

"Hello Ethan. It's been a while.'

No matter how many years had passed, I could never forget that voice!

Happy tears brimmed my eyes as I ran up and saw a face that looked extremely like Ethan's. "Oh goodness! Soren! It really is you!"

I opened my arms and tried to give the man who had accompanied me through some of my worst days a welcome-home hug, when I saw there was someone in his arms.

A young woman. She was unconscious. While there were no visible wounds, she looked distressed.

"Yes, it's me." Soren smiled. "Rosalie, it's wonderful to see you. You haven't changed a bit.' Then his smile faded quickly. "I know it's been a long time, but I need your help.'

"It's cold out, come on in." I gestured to him. Assuming that the person who needed help was the young lady he brought, I directed my kids, "Maeve and Rowan, help Soren put her down in the bedroom at the top of the stairs."

'Yes, mom," they responded in unison.

Without being asked, Soren explained as we laid the young woman down on the bed, "This is my daughter, Ciana. I wish I could introduce her to you all in a much less chaotic manner."

Soren had a daughter and she was absolutely gorgeous.

I had a thousand questions to ask him, but I had to pick the most urgent one right now. 'Tell us, what can we do?"

He looked stricken. His face was etched with worry and guilt. It looked as if he blamed himself for what had happened to his daughter, and I couldn't help but feel a twinge of sympathy for him.

Soren's gaze locked on me.

"Long story short, Ciana lost her life essence and her soul. She needs help from the White Queen!"

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It took all of us a while to digest the information that Soren brought.

Who would know there was a whole separate realm out there? No wonder we hadn't seen him for years in a row no matter how hard Ethan and Georgia tried to get in touch with him.

"It's been so long since we had any trace of you. I thought you were lost to us forever," Ethan said, his voice laced with emotion.

"I'd used the portal to go back and forth a few times, but I had no idea that the portal wasn't always in the same spot," Soren explained, pacing back and forth across the room.

"But you managed to locate it at the same time that Ciana needed help. Goddess must be watching out for her." I smiled, glancing over my shoulder at him, and saw Ciana in her sleeping form. She was a lovely girl, and I figured she got her blonde hair from her mother.

Soren nodded. "Very true. Not only did we locate the portal, Ciana also happened to be in possession of another Moon Stone, that's why I was able to bring her over. The Goddess has indeed blessed us with everything working in our favor this time, including the fact that when I stepped through the portal, I was so close to Winter Forest."

I listened to Soren's explanation, my mind racing with questions. It was clear that there was still so much we didn't know about the Realm of Shadow and the power of the Moon Stone. But right now, our focus needed to be on Ciana and finding a way to cure her.

"We'll do everything we can to save Ciana," I said, standing up and placing a hand on Soren's arm.

Soren let out a sigh. "Thank you so much, Rosalie. I appreciate it more than you'll ever know."

Rowan asked, "Based on what you said, uncle Soren, Ciana would need help to restore her life essence first, and then we also need to figure out a way to restore her soul?"

"I believe so."

"The life essence part seems relatively simple," Maeve analyzed, looking at me. "Mom's blood or my blood will do. But how can we restore her soul?"

Everyone turned their gaze at me. I smiled lightly at them and asked, "Family, are you ready for a trip to the sacred temple?"

Ethan paused for a moment. "You mean, the temple where your mother was buried?"

"Exactly." I nodded.

After a short moment, Ethan stood up from his seat. "Then we'd better get ready! I'll get some supplies pulled out for the trip. Rowan, come help me, would you?"

Rowan followed his father while Hannah went to put the kids to bed. Maeve stayed with me and we worked together to do a final assessment of Ciana's physical condition and get her prepared for what would need to be done at the temple.

Troy had been abnormally quiet the entire time. His gaze never left Soren ever since Soren had arrived. I heard from Maeve that he might have seen Soren when he was young and he probably had been wanting to get an answer.

"Troy, why don't you show Soren his room? We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow and I'm sure Soren could use some rest." I suggested.

“Sure!” My son-in-law gestured for Soren to follow him. As they walked away, I overheard him ask, “So... are you the Soren I met when I was younger? Or was that someone else with such an unusual name.”

Soren chuckled. “That was me. I knew your parents had become my enemies, but you were still family to me. Behar was my cousin. I wanted to make sure you were safe. I’m sorry I couldn’t have done more.”

The conversation brought a smile to my face. I was glad Troy was finally able to get some closure.

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We reached the sacred temple of the Moon Goddess before sunset the next day.

It hadn’t changed much since our visit many years ago when we needed to restore Ethan’s soul. The trees surrounding the temple were tall and majestic, their branches heavy with snow. The tranquil pond in front of the temple was frozen over, the surface slick and shiny.

Ethan and Rowan pushed the heavy, wooden gate open and I could feel the energy of this sacred place pulsing through me. This was where my mother, Queen Willa, had been crowned the White Queen, and where she and the other White Queens were buried.

As we entered the temple, our footsteps echoed off the stone floor. The altar at the center of the temple was surrounded by flickering candles, their light casting a warm glow on the room.

“Soren, let’s lay Ciana down on the altar,” I suggested.

Soren flattened Ciana on the altar and Maeve began to prepare for the ritual.

Behind the altar was a beautiful statue of the Moon Goddess. She was depicted as a woman with long, flowing hair and a peaceful expression on her face. She was surrounded by a halo of stars and a crescent moon, symbols of her power and divinity.

When I looked upon her gleaming marble statue that radiated a sense of holiness and serenity, I knew that the Moon Goddess was watching over us and lending her power to our cause. Years ago, we came here to save Ethan from his doomed fate as a rogue. Today, I prayed to the Goddess that the same ritual could restore the soul of our innocent Ciana.

We formed a circle, centering the altar. I took a deep breath and turned back to the group, their expressions somber as they waited for my instruction.

“Maeve and Hannah, come to my side, I’ll need your help.”

My daughter and daughter-in-law stepped closer to stand by either side of me.

With my eyes closed, I held Maeve’s hand, and started the ritual.

“Oh, holy Moon Goddess above, we beseech thee today to look down upon us and bless us with your undying love as we celebrate the life of those we love. We thank you for all of the blessings you have bestowed upon us, and we ask you to please be with each of us as we continue to do the work all of the former White Queens would expect us to do.”

I took a deep breath and continued, my voice growing more urgent. “Goddess, we ask for a miracle from you. We ask for your holy grace to rain down upon the one of us who has lost her soul.”



Hannah handed me an exquisite but sharp knife, and I gently sliced it across my left palm, and then Maeve did the same with her right. We held our bleeding hands over Ciana's lips and hoped that the magic within our veins could flow into her and help her regain her vitality.

Seeing the healthy glow returning to her face, I reached out and touched Ciana's forehead, channeling all of the magic within me into her. 'Goddess, please lend me your power and help the soul who is desperate for your guidance!'

As I spoke the words, I could feel the energy of the temple shifting and pulsing around us. The Moon Goddess was answering our call. It was time.

I began the ritualistic chant, the same one Cerina had used to save Ethan all of those years ago.

"Dieta de Lune, ma devo ti solasta gor libertia du essencia de ma harte de surita enilationa de ula exestian!"

Maeve and Hannah also joined me in the chanting, our voices echoing off the walls of the temple.

Ciana's breathing started to get heavier. I felt dark power beginning to gather and try to push my hand off of Ciana's forehead. I held strong, resisted the force and maintained the connection to Ciana's forehead.

Seeing beads of sweat seeping through my own forehead, Maeve placed her hand on top of mine, and I gave her an appreciative smile.

Together, our chant grew louder and louder.

Dieta de Lune, ma devo ti solasta gor libertia du essencia de ma harte de surita enilationa de ula exestian- Moon Goddess, I channel your power to free our loved one from the fate of a doomed life.

I didn't know how long it took. Finally, Ciana's breathing started to calm down, and the resistance that tried to break our physical connection slowly dissipated.

Confident that I had done everything I could, I opened my eyes and looked at Soren.

"It is finished. All we can do right now is wait."

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\*Ciana\*

It was a long dream.

Fire. Smoke. Howls of desperation.

It was a battlefield.

They said he was the ruthless Alpha of all, a cold-hearted monster who only knew how to destroy, and the thousands of bodies under me were the proof.

They told me that only eternal darkness was left in him, and I wouldn't sense hope in the air.

And there he was, standing on top of the pile of corpses, coated in blood.

His body was as still as a statue; his face was emotionless, almost no different than those of the dead on the ground below him.

Then he saw me.

I watched light gather in his dark eyes and life seemed to return to him. Slowly, his lips parted into a stunning smile that outshined the starry night sky.

He reached out his hand. 'Come to me,' he whispered.

My legs moved toward him as if they had a will of their own.

Even though they told me that every step I took was one step closer to my own eternal death.

'But they were lying to you!' a crisp child's voice said.

As I walked toward him, I suddenly noticed that I wasn't alone. There was a tiny little girl holding my hand. She had my hair, but a pair of beautiful sparkling dark eyes.

Her cheeks were round and rosy, a wide smile on her face. She wore a little yellow sundress and matching jelly sandals. Her hair was tied up in pigtails with little butterfly barrettes.

Light and warmth radiated off of her like she was a little sun, dispelling the gloominess around me.

I took her hand, and we walked to the man ahead of us.

He was waiting there patiently, watching us. With every step we took to get closer to him, the smile on his face grew bigger.

Without hesitation, I placed my hand in his, feeling my life leaving my body in exchange for the precious memories of our past.

Yes, I remembered who he was.

The Dark King Theo.

My love.

Then I heard the little angel next to me say, "Mommy, let's go home."

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\*Theo\*

I leaned against the windowsill and looked out at the palace as it stretched out around me. With a bourbon glass in one hand, I swirled the amber liquid around, hearing the ice cubes clinking against the glass.

Taking a sip, I looked at the broken lapel pin that I clung to in my other hand. The person who gave it to me meant more than anything else in the world. But it was broken. It broke from saving my life.

The sun was setting over the palace, making the entire sky look like it was on fire and the whole world seemed to be made of pure, liquid gold.

As beautiful as it was, it didn't brighten my day. The only person who could do that was not here with me, and I didn't know whether she ever would again.

When I woke up three months ago, Jake told me that her father had taken her to the Realm of Light to get help, and I hadn't heard anything about her ever since.

It was like she had been gone from my world completely.

Well, literally, it was the case.

I'd been pretty out of it when they'd taken her away but Jake had filled me in.

Alpha Soren seemed to be confident that he could persuade the White Queen to help Ciana. She could be physically healed and have her memories restored. Supposedly, she'd be blessed again so that she'd regain her immunity to my touch.

All sounded so promising except for no one knew when they would return.

I wondered how she was. Did she remember me yet? If she did, was she missing me like I missed her?

How was the baby? Had anyone even told her she was pregnant yet? After so much time, it wasn't like they could hide it from her. The baby would be growing and moving.

Would I ever get to meet my own child?

How much longer would this take?

Thirty days, thirty months, or thirty years? After all, Soren himself hadn't been able to find a path to go to his home world for almost twenty years.

I missed Ciana. My heart ached for her. I wanted her in my arms where she was safe and loved.

My fingers tingled at the memory of her warm skin under my touch. I refused to think I'd never get to feel her again.

She would return. I had faith in her.

Sighing, I took another sip of bourbon and turned away from the open window. As much as I missed her and wanted to know what was going on, there was not much I could do right this moment.

As much as I wanted to go chasing after Ciana and check on her, for the time being, I had to first focus on what was needed for the country.

I played with the lapel pin as I finished off my bourbon. Even now, it was the only piece of her that I could hold onto.

"There he is," Jake said, coming into my room.

"I thought my work was all caught up. Did I miss anything?"

"Nope," Jake smirked, "but you have someone's homework to check up on."

I tucked the pin into my front pocket, keeping it close to my heart like before. I almost forgot that it was report day today.

Jake and I went to Alexander's room.

As a prince, and current heir to the throne, he had certain responsibilities that were important for his education and growth. He was learning the history of our kingdom along with military strategies, economics, leadership and combat skills.

'Uncle Theo!' Alexander jumped out from his chair, but then he thought of something and bowed with a serious expression, "Greetings, Your Majesty."

Okay, it seemed that he also added etiquette to his curriculum.

"Greetings, Your Highness." I cleared my throat. It was a bit odd to be so formal, but I figured I needed to set a good example, especially if that was what he currently had been working on. "Today is report day. Let's see how your studies are going.'

Three of Alexander's tutors were with me and my nephew.

'Prince Alexander is incredibly smart and continues to excel,' one tutor told me.

'He has mastered self-defense and has progressed well in his attacks as well," his combat instructor said.

I nodded and looked over the report card they'd put together for me.

"Looking good. Pretty soon, I'll have to quiz you on your fighting skills myself."

He grinned at me.

"His Highness has been working very hard. One might say too hard. He is still a young, growing boy and needs to get his rest," another of his tutors suggested.

"Is that true?" I asked, arching an eyebrow at my nephew.

Alexander crossed his arms. "I still have much to improve before I can match you, Uncle Theo."

"You have a few years to do so. You have time, kid."

'But I want to be able to help you as soon as I can.'

"And you will. For now, be patient with yourself, focusing on building a solid foundation. Your time will come," I reminded him.

Although he didn't fight back this time, I could tell he still wasn't convinced.

Nodding to the tutors, I dismissed them so that Alexander and I could talk privately. I tossed his report card aside and knelt down in front of him.

"I know I can help you," he insisted.

'I know that too. But you don't need to rush this. I missed out on a lot growing up. While you have your royal responsibilities, I want you to have your childhood, too.'

'I'm very grown up already," Alexander reminded me. "There's not much you can do to change that."

I grinned at him and ruffled his hair. He made me think of Ciana again.

She and Alexander were alike. Independent, determined, and always wanted to share my burden.

I stood up, patting his shoulder. "When the time comes, I will appreciate your help."

"Uncle Theo, I miss Ciana," Alexander lowered his head.

"Where did that come from?" Had he read my mind?

Alexander shrugged. "I think about her a lot. When she is in the palace, everyone is way happier. I miss her."

I let out a long sigh. "You and me both."

"Do you know when she'll be back?" he asked, looking up at me with big, hopeful eyes.

I shook my head.

"Is she ever coming back?" he asked, revising his question.

"I wish I could tell you she was. But honestly, I don't know." I stood up and looked out the window again. "I don't know about you, but I've had a pretty long day and I'm quite tired."

Alexander nodded like an adult. "Uncle Theo, you carry on. I need to get ready to go to bed soon. A well-rested mind is required to be physically and mentally prepared for high intensity study and training."

"Kid, who taught you all that?"

"Ciana!" he beamed.

I sighed again.

After bidding Alexander good night. The breeze was pleasantly refreshing, and I allowed myself to wander around the garden aimlessly until I encountered Perceval slithering around.

"What are you doing here?"

He flicked his forked tongue at me, his beautiful scale shimmering in the moonlight. Perceval waved his head back and forth at me like he was trying to tell me something.

"You know that Ciana is the one who reads into your antics, Perceval, not me." I wagged a finger at him. Normally, it was my animals that followed me, not the other way around.

Perceval licked his tongue at me again and rose up off the ground.

"Alright, I'll follow you." I gave in. It wasn't like I had much to do for the rest of the night anyway.

Delighted, Perceval turned and slithered away from me. I followed after him, wondering what made me go along with my snake. Perhaps, I did so out of some desire to feel closer to Ciana.

Perceval led me out into the gardens and toward the enclosure where I kept my animals. With every step, my heart beat faster and lighter.

Was he taking me to the pavilion?

That was our spot, me and Ciana.

I couldn't explain why my heart was galloping in my chest. I felt as giddy as a school girl, a little pep in my step as I got closer. Excitement and adrenaline coursed through me.

Perceval slithered in the grass but I couldn't wait. I walked faster and then broke into a run.

Like a man possessed, my body acted without me directing it. It was like my heart and fate were all guiding me at once.

I ran to the pavilion. No one was on the first floor and without even pausing, I ran to the stairs and bolted to the second floor.

My heart nearly burst from my chest when I saw her warm, sunny smile beaming at me. The sun might have set, but it didn't matter, she was the only light I needed in my life. She'd been wandering through my dreams for months.

Now, she was as radiant as ever, glowing so brightly.

Ciana bit her lower lip and looked down, her hands resting on a slightly swollen, pregnant belly. That was my child growing inside of her.

My breath caught in my throat. She looked more beautiful than ever, outshining the rising moon behind her.

Every day and every night I had longed to see her again.

She met my eyes and gave me a sultry smile.

'What took you so long, Your Majesty? You should know better than to keep a woman waiting,' she asked playfully.

'The dreamberry is ripe again.' She plucked it off the stem and held it to her lips, kissing it.

'If I eat this one, will you kiss me again?'

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 494

\*Ciana\*

Ever since I came back from the Realm of Light, Theo, along with everyone else, was obsessively protective of me. Even Dottie had given me doctor's orders, requiring me to take it easy. But how could I sit around doing nothing? So I decided on a project that could keep me busy for a while.

A scrapbook of our relationship for the baby.

'You know, the more I think over our memories, the more I realize that there are so many crazy incidents in our past. I'm not sure if I want to share all that with our child. Any thoughts?'

I glanced at Theo, who had just come out from the shower, getting ready for bed.

'Why not, I think they're fine, as long as you leave out the way we met,' he commented as he walked out from the shower, only wearing his boxers.

'But we need to have our first meeting. The baby has to know about that,' I insisted.

'Ciana, I killed seven people in front of you when you first came here,' he reminded me.

'Well, seven assassins. I guess we should skip that part. But you know, that wasn't really the first time we met. How about when you stole a kiss with the dreamberry, and the time you locked me in with a bunch of wild animals? And our first intimate time together was in a hallucination when we didn't even know who we were!'

'Ciana,' Theo stood by the bed, stroking his chin. 'Before I answer those questions, could you tell me whether I did anything wrong?'

I was confused, "Uh?"

'If not, why am I being expelled from my own bed?' He glared at all my scrapbooking supplies spread out on the mattress as if they were his biggest foes.

There were so many drawings and clippings with memories of my relationship with Theo that I couldn't find another big enough flat surface to display them all.

'Oh, sorry about that.' I quickly gathered my scattered project essentials and made room for the king. This was his bed after all.

'I didn't feel enough sincerity from your apology.' Theo arched an eyebrow, obviously not satisfied. Then he closed the space between us, hovered over and smiled at me seductively.

His body was emitting immense amounts of heat, mixed with his scent of fresh rain... oh well, there was nothing I could do to stop the fluttering in my stomach.

'Theo...hey... urn...'

Without warning, his hot lips covered mine, and his tongue took the liberty to sweep every inch inside of my mouth.

Like a switch, my core heated up and I could feel my panties getting warm and moist.

My tongue danced with his and my arm looped around his neck. He split my legs and lifted my hip up, pressing his enlarged desire against me.

I moaned in his mouth. "Um... Theo...Um..."

'Apology accepted,' he smirked mischievously, finally releasing my lips from his dominating kiss.

I took the chance to gulp in some air.

Theo grinned and closed the scrapbook with all my pictures and clippings in it. He set the book aside and wrapped his arm around my shoulders, putting his other hand on my growing stomach.

'Baby, to answer your earlier question, no matter what, our kid is going to know that we love each other and we love them. The rest doesn't matter.'

I smiled at Theo. "You know, sometimes you say exactly the right thing.'

He smirked and pulled me to him, kissing me passionately on the mouth again.

'See, I didn't even need a dreamberry for this one,' he muttered against my lips and his hand moved from my stomach to my breast, making them feel tight and heavy. Chills and desires coursed through my body and I let out a moan again as I watched him smirk dangerously above me.

Then he leaned down and nibbled my earlobe as he whispered, "And why don't we review that intimate time from the hallucination again?"

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Brook stopped by for a weekend brunch. While I went to meet her, I had my scrapbook tucked under my arm. I'd been carrying it around with me in case I got sudden inspiration or ideas. It kept coming to me at strange times and I wanted to be prepared.

'Ciana, your baby bump is so adorable!' Brook ran over and hugged me tightly.

I giggled and hugged her back, awkwardly since my belly was big enough to get in the way.

Laughing and flushed, Brook put her hands on my belly.

'How are you doing? Any symptoms? Is the pregnancy going well?' she asked all her questions at once.

'In general, going well. Let's find a place to sit first, if you don't mind?'

"Oh, goodness, yes, of course," Brook said, slapping her palm against her forehead.

We sat down and I gladly filled my plate with as much food as I could reach. Eating for two was definitely noticeable now.

'To answer your questions, my appetite is up and down. Fortunately, that is about it right now. I'm fine, though, and the baby is fine. Everything is going really well,' I explained. "How about you?"

Brook immediately put a forkful of pancake into her mouth and chewed it slowly.

'Okay, Brook, what's wrong?' I asked, knowing right away that something was on her mind. She had the biggest tell in the world!

Brook shrugged and then finally unloaded. "I can't believe that Sophia is back in the palace. I mean what is she even doing here?" She put her fork down loudly.

I cleared my throat and snickered. "Oh, well, she wants to be back."

Brook gaped at me. 'She wants to be back, and you just let her? Do you not remember all those nasty things she said to you when we first got here? She even tried to have us starved. She is vicious!'

'Well, she asked to come back to the palace as a return favor for helping us. You know, without her, we might not even be here today. Also, she persuaded her pack to financially aid in the restoration and recovery of the country. It was a small request to grant,' I explained.

Brook narrowed her eyes at me and shook her head. She seemed quite judgemental about this. I couldn't blame her. Sophia had made Brook really sick with her games.

'Even if that was the case, how about Prince Warren? Everyone knows what she thinks about Warren. Is he even okay with her being back?'



I rolled some fresh fruit around on my plate. My appetite would vanish as quickly as it came on sometimes. I set my fork down and started rubbing my stomach. That was my little baby.

‘Actually, after hearing her request, Warren was the one who decided to invite her back,’ I told Brook.

‘Why!?’

I sighed. “Everyone makes mistakes. Warren said that he himself had made mistakes before and was given chances to make up for them. Out of everyone else in the palace, he probably empathized with Sophia the most and felt she should have a chance, too. We can’t overlook that her pack volunteered to contribute financial support for rebuilding the country...”

‘Am I the only one who feels Warren has sacrificed his romantic life for political reasons?’ Brook mumbled, looking at her empty plate.

I didn’t want to make a comment. Warren would find his way. I didn’t know if that would include him finding his mate or ever settling down with someone. I hoped he’d find happiness, in whatever form was best for him.

Brook blinked at me several times from across the table. I could see the wheels turning in her head. Her eyes flicked to the scrapbook on the table.

‘What are you carrying around?’ she asked, changing the subject.

‘This is for the baby. I want my child to grow up with some memories of how Theo and I fell in love. The only problem is... well, there’s a lot of violence and craziness in there.’

‘Well, the scrapbook doesn’t have to be a play by play. Does it? It should be easy to document how you fell in love. That part is like a fairytale,’ Brook pointed out.

I creased my brow and pondered on her words.

Brook was right! It wasn’t about the specific memories and events that happened. It was about the feelings and how we had found each other, the struggles we went through to keep each other, and how after the worst odds, we were able to fall in love and build a life together.

‘You know, I guess it is a little like a fairytale,’ I admitted, chuckling.

‘You know what I think would be cute. You should put a lock of hair from each of you in it. Oh, and the lapel pin,’ Brook suggested.

I nodded and smiled. At least, she had some good suggestions!

After brunch, I decided to spend my afternoon in the library to work on my project. Now that Brook had helped me out, I had all the inspiration I needed to put the scrapbook together. It was going to be a great account of how Theo and I fell in love.

I traced my fingers over the locks of hair I’d taped into the book. So my child could always have a piece of me and Theo.

‘Hey, Ciana,’ Warren’s voice pulled me from my thoughts.

'Oh, hey Warren. What are you doing here?' I asked, smiling up at him.

'Well, I was on my way to meet Theo and I saw you sitting in here, alone,' he said. "I hope you're doing something fun, otherwise I'll have to tell Dottie and Theo."

I giggled and closed the scrapbook, showing him the cover. 'I'm making a scrapbook for my baby. I want them to learn about their parents and how they fell in love. I'm open to suggestions.'

'That sounds great!' Warren stroked his chin. "Speaking of memories..."

'Warren?'

He raised his wrist. There I saw the bracelet that I had given away many years ago.

"Here." He took it off, handing it over. "This belongs to you, and it should go back to its original owner."

I shook my head. There were times I wanted it back as well, but every time, I decided against it.

'Warren, Maggie gave you that. You should keep it. It reminds you of your twin.'

Ciana, it was never hers to give." Warren insisted, "I should've given it back to you a long time ago. I've just been holding onto it for safety. Besides, I have everything I need to remember Maggie.'

He grabbed my hand and put the bracelet in my palm. I studied the bracelet as it sat on my palm and smiled gratefully at Warren.

Warren's gaze fell on me gently. 'Maggie told me this bracelet was blessed by the Moon Goddess. And you know what, she was right. I do think it brings good luck.'

Warren curled his hand around mine, closing my fingers around the bracelet and making sure that I knew it belonged to me.

I tightened my hand around the bracelet.

"Ciana, do you ever think you'll ever find the boy that you gifted this bracelet to?" Warren asked.

I forgot that Warren didn't know Theo was the person I met in the woods so many years ago.

'It was so long ago... I never... I never thought I'd see that boy again,' I said absently. 'Thank you, Warren.'

'You're very welcome,' he said, his hand still around mine.

'What are you two doing?' Theo's stiff voice echoed through the quiet library.

Quickly, I pulled my hand from Warren's.

'Just scrapbooking.' I quickly provided the explanation.

'Um...' Theo crossed his arms and arched an eyebrow. I didn't know what he was thinking about.

'Really,' I assured.

'Warren, I thought you were on your way to meet me. We have that meeting with the Alpha Council,' Theo said through gritted teeth.

'Right, I'm with you.' Warren nodded to Theo and then turned to me, "Ciana, I have some time this evening. If you're still working on this and need help, I can meet you here."

Theo sniffed and glared between Warren and me. Then he asked, "Warren, don't you need to take Sophia out for dinner this evening?"

My eyes widened. Warren and Sophia were dating?! That was big news!

Warren was confused, "How did I not know about that?"

Theo smirked, "Because I just asked Jake to book it for you. He told me that Sophia was ecstatic when she heard that you invited her for dinner."

Warren protested loudly, "Theo! You can't do that to me just because I was talking to Ciana!"

Theo strode across the room and stood behind me, putting a firm hand on my shoulder without saying anything else. He didn't need to, because his action had made it very clear. 'She is mine!'

'The council is waiting on us,' Theo said.

As Theo ushered his brother out of the library, Warren rolled his eyes at Theo. Before he exited the room, he waved at me. "Do me a favor, Ciana. Punch him for me when you get a chance!" "You got it," I assured him with a chuckle and slid the bracelet into an envelope.

Glancing up at Theo, I caught his eye. A small smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 495

\*Ciana\*

Laying in bed, Theo pulled me into him and gave my cheek a kiss from behind. My body molded into his perfectly. I sighed as he drew me in closer, rubbing his large hand over my belly.

I was almost six months along, and my baby bump had begun to show. I was always amazed when I looked at my body and how it morphed and changed to accommodate our child.

Being pregnant had been one of the most rewarding things on this earth for me. Theo and I had created something out of our love for one another.

'Good night, my love,' he murmured against my skin. "Tomorrow is a big day for you."

I let out a heavy sigh and moved more into him. "Yes, it is."

Tomorrow would be my 21st birthday, which meant that I would finally be of age to shift and find my wolf, which also meant that I would be able to recognize whether or not Theo was my mate.

My heart told me he was but not everything was set in stone. All signs pointed to him but there was still that little doubt that played in my mind.

What if there was the slightest possibility that he wasn't?

Theo must have sensed my tenseness because he willed me to turn around so that I was now facing him. He ticked a stray of hair behind my ear and looked me dead in the eye.

“It will all work out, Ciana. We’ve got this. You’re mine and I’m yours, okay?” He captured my lips in the sweetest of kisses and then leaned his forehead against mine.

Our baby wiggled in between us making herself known. We were both convinced that it was a girl and I just knew in my heart that she was.

“Baby girl seems to agree with her father,” I giggled. “I still can’t believe we made a little life!”

“I can.” He rubbed my swelling belly. “I’m sure she is as beautiful and brave as her mother.”

I placed my hand on top of his over my stomach. “And I hope that she has her father’s courageous and resilient heart.”

I placed my head on his chest and closed my eyes, willing sleep to come to me but I knew it was pointless. There was no way that I would be able to sleep tonight. Too much was going to happen tomorrow and my heart was unsettled.

I believed in our bond and the love we had, but that didn’t lessen my anxiety of the unknown. No matter how hopeful we were, there still were possibilities that he wasn’t my mate, and what if one day his true mate came into the picture? Would his love for me simply dissolve?

All my worries made my heart beat speed up. I was desperate to find a comfortable position to settle in, but I failed miserably. However, I tried my best to keep myself still so that I didn’t bother Theo.

When I felt Theo’s chest rise and fall slowly I knew that he was asleep. I carefully crawled out of the bed making sure not to wake him and put on a hoodie and a pair of sweats.

Making my way out of the room, all I could think about was tomorrow.

When I passed the grand clock in the long hallway, I saw the time and I had just under two hours before my 21 st birthday. There was no possible way I could wait in bed quietly and pretend to be

asleep for the rest of the night!

I made it out of the back gardens and a little bit into the forest behind the palace. There sat the Moon Goddess temple.

The silver moonlight coated the praying hall. It wasn’t an overbearingly grand building, but rather a mid-sized, simple, open square hall with twelve stone columns supporting a marble rooftop. Surrounding the temple was a garden that stretched out to vast open fields and into the forest.

The white marble statue of the Goddess stood closer to the east end of the hall, looking down on us.

The moment I stepped onto the white marble floors with my bare feet, I felt serenity and peace wash over me. I didn’t come here often but when I did, I always felt my heart ease.

With my hand over my belly and my knee knelt on the floor, I closed my eyes and surrendered my heart to the divine deity.

She was the one that ordained the matebond and she was the one who blessed the unions of the pair that should be fated to each other. She was the only one who could grant me my wish.

'Great Goddess of the Moon, I come before you here as the daughter of an alpha and a mother. You witnessed the great endeavor Theo and I have been through to get to this point. The blood that was shed, the darkness that was defeated and the courage it took. We're grateful for this baby that grows stronger each day in my belly...'

A large lump lodged itself in my throat. "I love him, Goddess. I cannot imagine a life without him. Please let Theo be the one who is fated with me. Please bless us with the bond that will solidify our destinies together forever."

The Goddess didn't move and I chanted to myself in my heart that it had to be him. It could only be him. I couldn't even bring myself to envision my life with anyone else.

I continued with my plea until echoing footsteps drew my attention. My eyes flew open.

I quickly wiped off the tears that wet my face and hid myself behind the closest column.

Who else would be here at this hour?

When the elegant silhouette got closer, I was surprised to find that it was Theo's mother, Nita.

I wondered what brought her here. When I came back, she had already moved out of the palace. Brook told me that she decided to stay where the Ortiz pack was, and hence I hadn't seen her, and I definitely wouldn't expect to see her here tonight.

She knelt down before the Goddess just like I had, and I heard my name mentioned. "Ciana Black... twenty-one..."

I leaned closer and listened carefully to what she was saying.

'Please let her be my son's mate. Please bless their union, Goddess. She brought light to his life and as a mother, that is all I could ever want for him. They love each other. I can sense and I can feel it...'

She was praying to the Moon Goddess about us!

Ever since Sebastian's death, although Nita's attitude had softened toward Theo and me, we were still far from being close. Sometimes, I felt that both Theo and his mother had been keeping their distance from each other for so long that neither of them could take the initiative to rebuild their relationship.

However, that didn't mean they didn't love each other.

I just didn't expect her to come back to the palace before my birthday, just to pray for her son-for us. That truly warmed my heart.

The last thing I wanted to happen was to be caught eavesdropping on Nita, therefore, with a smile on my face, I slowly tiptoed away from the temple and made my way out to the garden.

I wasn't ready to go back to the palace. Some fresh air sounded like a wonderful idea to me at this moment.

It was almost midnight and the moon had almost reached her apex. All of a sudden, I started to feel an indescribable chill coursing through my body. Something stirred within me. I felt her-my wolf. Swimming in the back of my mind.

I pressed my hand over my belly and felt the little flutters in my stomach. Baby could feel it too.

Suddenly, I was eager to get up and run.

Was it almost time?

I let my instincts take over. My walk turned into a brisk jog, and then before I knew it I placed one foot in front of the other and began running in a random direction.

I should have been worried about the baby but I just knew that she would be okay. All the fear and doubt melted from my body and all that remained was anticipation and excitement.

I was going to do this. It was happening right now.

I picked up my pace. I had taken many runs before, but never one like this. I felt so... free. So at ease with myself and my spirit.

I pushed myself even harder and came to a halt in the clearing. The moon's rays beamed down on me and I felt it. Deep within my chest, I felt my wolf awaken and come to life.

I closed my eyes and lowered myself to the ground. I focused my mind on the image of a wolf. The paws, the nose, the fangs. I focused on every single detail that made up my majestic beast.

That was when I felt the first bone crack and my shift began.

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\*Theo\*

I had been following Ciana.

She thought I was asleep but there was no way that I could sleep through any of this. At midnight, we would finally find out if it was all fate in the end.

There were very few times in my life I was nervous about the unknown. But tonight, I was. To the core.

I couldn't see my life without Ciana. She was all I ever desired and all I ever needed to share everything with for the rest of my life. She was my oxygen. Living without her would be no different from a swift and early death.

She had gone to the Goddess temple to pray. A prayer that had been on my heart for a long time as well.

We were now less than half an hour from her birthday and my mind was running wild. I knew my decision. Mate or not, it wouldn't change who she was to me.

I loved her, always had, and always would. My mate sense was suppressed, and I had no intention to restore that, so that my heart and soul would always belong to her.

But she had her choices.

Out of respect for her privacy, I didn't follow her into the temple. Honestly, I didn't need to eavesdrop to know what she would be praying for.

I came here simply because I desired to be close to her and be the first person to meet her wolf.

She had been in the temple for a while now and I wondered how long she would be in there for, so I decided to take a peek just to ensure she was doing all right.

However, when I turned the corner, I found that the person in deep prayer wasn't Ciana.

It was my mother.

I was shocked to see her here. She had moved out of the palace and moved back to Ortiz. I knew she hated this place. It held too many tainted memories for her as Sebastian had made her life hell while she was here.

We didn't speak much if at all while she was away. There was too much pain we needed to sort through and too many wounds that we had to heal in order to mend our relationship.

Only time could work those wonders.

I had sent her maids, chefs and various servants. They all reported that she was doing well. I had meant to visit her but between handling the post-war restoration and caring for Ciana and the baby, I had been tied up.

I plastered my back against one of the columns and listened closely to what she was saying.

"...them be mates. Give him the courage to love her wholeheartedly and without doubt.

I know they are meant to be."

She was praying for Ciana and I.

I knew how she and Ciana had not seen eye to eye since the beginning. The fact that she cared enough to put us before the moon goddess meant a great deal to me.

"I know you're there, Theo." My mother's voice became louder.

I stepped out from behind the stone pillar and saw her getting up from the ground gracefully. Even to this day, she was as regal as a loyal lady could be.

She stood there elegantly and her arms were slightly opened to me. I hesitated for a moment before walking up to her and gave her a quick embrace.

I was about a head taller than her but when her arms gently came around me, it suddenly reminded me of the days when I was a young boy.

Trying to start our conversation, I asked, 'Mother, why didn't you tell me you were coming back to the palace?'

She let go of me and her usually expressionless face was softened under the moonlight. "You're busy enough. I didn't want to bother you. How are you?"

I let out a low breath. "She is going to shift soon."

My mother nodded. "Nervous?"

'I would be lying if I said no.'

She didn't comment on my agitation, instead she asked, "Do you know why I'm here?"

But she didn't wait for my answer. I knew she didn't really need me to answer. With a small smile on her face, she said, "I came here to thank the Goddess for saving you from your dark and lonely fate."

I nodded my head.

"For a long time, I thought fate was unfair, for myself and for you, but now I know that the Goddess always has a plan..."

I opened my mouth to speak but some rustling caught my attention. I immediately placed my mother behind me. To shield her from whatever possible harm there was.

I was ready to defend her but then my body relaxed when I came face to face with the most majestic creature I had ever laid eyes on.

There was Ciana in her wolf form. Her fine light-brown fur glowed in the silver moonlight, making her soft golden silhouette even more breathtaking. The entire world was painted in dark blue and black, and she was the only color and light on earth other than the full moon.

The small bump on her belly showcasing our growing pup and her mesmerizing eyes pierced into my soul, seizing all of my heart.

I looked up at the position of the moon in the sky and knew that it was well past midnight.

Where had all the time gone?

But one thing was missing though. Something that was so crucial.

As expected, I couldn't feel the matebond.

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 496

'She's gorgeous...' I murmured.

I saw her, I smelled her, and I didn't know it was possible, but I adored her even more.

However, my wolf didn't recognize her.

It was a shame that I would never know whether she was my mate for sure, but I tried to persuade myself that it didn't matter. My love for her wouldn't change regardless.

However, there was a small voice in my head that wanted to find out the truth. It questioned whether I really should give up the chance of establishing the most magical and unbreakable bond with the woman that meant everything to me.

Ciana looked in my direction. I wondered whether she felt anything different.

'Theo,' my mother's voice sounded distant but determined, 'kneel before the Goddess!'

I shook my head. 'No, mother. I know what you're going to do. You don't need to restore my mate sense,' I scoffed at myself, 'I know, your son is a coward.'



'Theo, look at me,' she ordered, "Trust the Goddess and trust her plan for you two.'

My mother put her hand on my shoulder and willed me to bend my knees. She didn't place any weight on me, but for whatever reason, I listened to her and dropped my body to a half-kneeling position in front of her.

She pressed her hands on my chest and stared into my eyes.

'Relax and do not fight me. Okay?'

I nodded slightly but my mind was still spiraling.

My mother closed her eyes and started to chant something under her breath. I couldn't exactly describe what she was chanting but I did catch the word 'soul' in there.

Her hands started to heat where she touched my chest. There was a slight glow that came from her fingertips. Her eyes remained closed but her brow furrowed.

Her body shook slightly as she continued to chant. I tried to speak but it was as if my voice had been stolen and I couldn't utter a single word.

"Don't try to talk." My mother gritted out.

My mother's head snapped backward and her eyes snapped open. I could see the glow in them. Blood seeped from the corner of her lips and her body shook uncontrollably.

I was about to stop her from hurting herself when the warmth that had been on my chest turned into an intense burning. My mother pressed down on me harder and I felt like I was being pushed backward. My eyes slammed shut as I surged back into my subconscious.

Dark mists surrounded me and all my senses were dull. Then something started to feel warm in my chest. It continued to heat up, turning into wildfire, sweeping across my entire body. The darkness was chased away and all of a sudden my senses were sharpened.

Warmth and heat spouted in my chest, quickly melting the icy-cold shell that had been sealed around my heart and I was plunged back into my consciousness.

I jerked up and let out a loud gasp like I had just surfaced from being underwater.

Then my body was ten times lighter, and all my senses were unimaginably enhanced. However, there was only one thing that grasped my attention.

The golden wolf was not far away from us.

My vision was so clear that I could tell each individual fur of hers and I could hear her breathing rhythming with the heartbeat of our pup in her belly.

Then I smelled her. Her subtle water lily scent filled my nostrils, and immediately, I was intoxicated. Her scent was more heavenly than the most aromatic flower and more luscious than the richest wine. Every single hair of mine stood on end as my entire body buzzed with electricity.

Her gaze landed on me.

As soon as our eyes connected I knew. I knew that from this moment on, nothing could ever separate us.

It was her. How could I ever doubt it? I should have known it from that very first kiss in the pavilion but I had been too afraid to seek confirmation.

“Mate.”

I whispered the word like I was her most sincere worshiper.

“Go to her.’ My mother encouraged me, gleams flickered in her eyes. “Go to your mate, son.”

I didn’t need to be told twice. I leapt into the air and shifted into my black wolf, landing perfectly on all fours.

My heart pumped with anticipation, and my wolf was agitated at me for not getting to her fast enough.

Ciana stood there quietly, watching my approach. The night breeze brushed through her soft hair, and her gorgeous eyes collected all of the lights from the stars.

It was breathtaking to know that the Goddess had gifted me the most striking being in the world as my mate.

She took a step toward me and raised her nose in the air. She breathed the air between us, taking in my scent.

She then closed the distance between us and touched our noses together. This simple physical connection alone sent waves of bliss through my body, making my heart fly ten thousand feet high.

Then she walked past me, let out a howl and started running.

My wolf head smiled and immediately took off after her. No words were needed at this moment. No matter where our legs would take us, our hearts would always find each other.

I caught up to her side, accompanying her for her first run. She started with trotting, then her pace picked up. The wind blew louder in our ears and waved through our fur.

There was no boundary on where we could go. The world was ours, and wherever she went, I’d follow.

Then she darted ahead of me as if to challenge my speed.

I let out a long howl and happily chased after her. Coming, my love.

I sprinted faster and caught up to her in no time at all. We moved with one another in perfect sync, enjoying each other and the ecstatic chill that running in our wolf brought us.

Strength, speed, freedom.

We ran for what felt like hours and she slightly slowed down.

I reduced my pace to be right next to her and I led her up the hill where we had our first date.

I had planned it all for weeks. I knew that this was the place I wanted to bring her when she first shifted.

The moon hung high, casting a gorgeous blue glow around it. The stars twinkled brightly like diamonds in the sky and countless fireflies surrounded us, illuminating the night. It was as if we were immersed in a sea of sparkling lights.

I could not have asked for a more romantic night.

I shifted out of my wolf form and saw some fireflies land on her golden fur. She was so stunningly beautiful that I had to take a few deep breaths to recollect what I wanted to say.

I placed my hand on her head and pressed my forehead against her nostrils.

“Shift, my love.”

She followed my words and returned to her human form.

Her golden long hair cascaded down, half-covering her goddess-like naked form.

“I shifted,” she said those words in a low voice, walking towards me like she had just emerged from the finest painting of a heavenly deity, “and you’re my mate.”

I cupped her face in my trembling hands and drew her closer to me. “Yes, I am.”

I crashed my lips down onto hers and she melted into me. Ciana moaned into my mouth.

I lifted her by her legs so she could circle them around me. She ran her hands in my hair and tugged at the strand causing my erection to harden.

Before tonight, I never knew that I had a chunk of myself missing. Now the only person who could fill that part of me was right in my arms, I couldn’t wait even a second longer to make her all mine again.

I laid her down on the soft grass and my hand moved up and down her slickness, taking every slight reaction of hers in.

Her body trembled and she arched her back. Clouds formed in her half-lidded blue eyes, blurring her gaze that was reflecting the sparkling lights all around us. She had never looked more beautiful than she did in this moment.

“Ah... Theo...” she moaned again.

My kisses landed on her swollen belly, silky hair and porcelain skin, setting every inch of me and my wolf on fire, burning us with the most primal lust and desire.

Our eyes locked and everything around us faded away. All that remained was just the two of us. Her kiss, her touch, her scent. It was all that I could take, all that I could consume.

“I love you.” She caressed my cheek in her hand.

“I love you, Ciana Black. So fucking much it hurts.”

I eased my way into her. With every inch I pushed in, she latched onto me beautifully taking me all in.

Her walls wrapped around me like a warm blanket and I had to stay still for a moment to keep myself from bringing this moment to an abrupt end.

She had always felt amazing but this time it was different.

Every single cell of me came to life and every single one of them was screaming their ecstatic excitement, like they had been in the desert their entire life waiting for water and now they were given an ocean.

“Theo...” she moaned again.

“Fuck, Ciana, you have no idea what you’re doing to me!” I gritted through my teeth and forced myself to move out of her a little, and then immediately slid back in.

This was our special moment. Whatever I did, I wanted this to be the one night that she remembered for the rest of her life, so I moved out of her again but this time I rammed back into her with a slightly greater force.

“Ah...” she sighed, satisfied by my movement.

I took her legs and circled them around my waist and lifted her hips so I could move in from a different angle. I didn’t know how it was possible that she made me feel so fucking fantastic.

She arched her back and let out a loud moan which I swallowed with my kiss.

I pumped in and out of her with a deep and fast rhythm. With every thrust, I was rewarded with a loud moan and the contraction of her walls.

I placed a hand between us and rubbed on her clit bringing her closer and closer to the edge.

“Bite me,” I panted as I leaned down, offering her my neck. Immediately, I felt her soft and moist tongue licked the root of my neck, then followed by pressure from her teeth along with a muffled moan.

My body quivered and I let out a moan myself.

“Mark me!” I ordered. I didn’t need to hear her words to know she granted my wish because the pressure from her bite increased, causing a little pain accompanied by a great thrill of pleasure.

Then something pierced through my skin. Another wave of electricity coursed through me, sending blissful shivers from the top of my head to the tip of my toes.

“Theo,” she moaned into the midnight sky. Her exquisite pink lips parted and I heard her demand, “I... I want you!”

A bomb went off and swept away any remaining self-control I had left.

I accelerated my thrusts into her, rapidly and relentlessly. With every drive into her, the craving for her grew stronger. My animal instinct took over, the insatiable hunger for her devoured me. I sank my teeth into her neck, leaving the mark that would forever be carved into our souls.

The world started to spin around us. I couldn’t see anything but her beautiful face; I couldn’t hear anything but her sweet voice; I couldn’t feel anything but her filling the Ciana-shaped hollowness in my soul.

“Theo...” her walls collapsed around me, squeezing me in. And then I burst.

She found her release and I followed closely behind her. We rode out our orgasms together as a completed being.

Slowly, the cloud of animalistic lust faded, replaced by dream-fulfilling contentment and pure happiness.

I collapsed beside her and pulled her chest to mine. We were both panting and we just laid there for a moment, looking up at the starry sky and the air adorned by the twinkling fireflies.

I wanted to freeze this moment in time.

I pushed my upper body up with one elbow to look at her. Her soft blue eyes met mine and her mouth curved into a tender smile.

My free hand roamed from her lips, her chin, her slender neck, the cleavage of her breasts and landed on her belly.

Her, me, our beautiful baby on this glamorous night.

These were the moments I never thought would ever be possible for someone like me. But she made it so. She made me believe in happily ever after.

I could just watch her like this forever, but I had something else that needed to be done tonight.

“Stay here for a moment.” I sat up and went to one of the hollowed out trees where I had placed a change of clothes for both of us.

The moment had finally arrived and if I was being honest, I was extremely nervous.

I helped her get dressed, and she allowed me to. The entire time, she didn't say anything but smiled at me.

She didn't need to. Because we knew how each other felt-no one could understand more what love was than we did at this moment.

When we were both clothed, I grabbed her hands and pulled her to her feet.

I let out a low whistle to signal Perceval to come with the parcel I had given him earlier in the evening.

Ciana looked at me confused before she saw the large python slithering toward us, a small box in his mouth.

Perceval dropped the box in my palm as I started, “I used to hate what fate had forced on me and resented the Goddess for cursing me with the ability that would doom me for lifelong darkness and loneliness. Then I met you.”

Ciana's eyes went wide with surprise.

“You brought light and hope to me and you saved me from my desperate destiny. Ciana, I couldn't tell you how much I appreciate you, worship you. You are my life and my world and I'll cherish you every second of every day till the end of time.”

“Oh my goddess,” she gasped, her hands covering her mouth.

I dropped down on one knee and popped the box open to reveal the ring inside.

'Happy birthday, Ciana Black,' I looked up at the love of my life, "Will you marry me?"

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 497

\*Ciana\*

In the early afternoon on the day before my wedding, I stood on a fitting platform while Brook worked on the final fitting for my dress and Sherry worked on finding the right makeup palette that would match the occasion.

I said "occasion" because it was not just my wedding anymore. The Public Relation department had turned it into this ordeal of a national celebration and public event as the first step to establish a transparent and people-friendly image of the royal court.

Floor length mirrors surrounded me on three sides while my friends worked to turn me into a beautiful princess bride.

The dress I was stuck in was far more lavish than I ever imagined. Apparently, because I was in my third trimester, the seamstress thought that weighing me down with excessive layers of fabric would make me more comfortable.

It was a hefty ball gown with several layers of taffeta and tulle making up the wide spread hoop-skirt.

The bodice was encrusted with jewel—studded lace. It snuggled around my pregnant belly and fitted around my breasts, making them pop out in ways I wasn't used to.

"You look absolutely stunning, Ciana," Sherry said, pulling me from my thoughts.

'The seamstress and her four helpers spent more than two weeks non stop making this dress for you. She did really well, people probably won't even notice that you're pregnant," Brook added.

'And with your natural beauty it just makes this dress so much more outstanding," Sherry added.

She started working on my hair, pinning it up in a half-up, half-down do.

'It is so easy to get a makeup color palette that matches your natural skin tones and eyes and hair color," she said.

She peeked over my shoulder and I met her eyes in the mirror. I smiled and nodded politely.

'It isn't weird that I'm in a traditional, pure white wedding dress, and also nearly seven months pregnant?" I asked, putting my hands on my belly.

Sherry and Brook laughed and kept working.

I looked at my reflection in all three of the mirrors. The dress was gorgeous from every angle, except for the fact that it just didn't feel right on me.

Suddenly, I had a flashback to when I'd tried on dresses in the Moonlit Crystal for my fake wedding to Warren.

Theo and Brook had both been there. Brook had been so full of praise for the dresses I wore, but Theo... He'd said all kinds of things.

'... with a skirt like that, you could be dropped out of an airplane at ten thousand feet and sail gently to the ground.'

His words echoed in my head and I ran my hands along the hefty, wide skirt I was currently wearing. This skirt was so similar to that one. Would Theo think the same thing this time?

I hope it doesn't snow, though. In a dress like that, well never find you.'

Another comment about the dress color stuck in my mind. I frowned as I examined the color of this dress. It was the purest white I'd ever seen, just like freshly fallen snow.

I groaned a little and shook my head. Was there such a thing as the flawless wedding dress?

Then there was the last comment Theo had made.

'... I just think maybe you should try a dress on in the right size. That one clearly doesn't fit. You're spilling out all over the top of it.'

Glancing down at myself, I saw how my third-trimester-pregnant breasts popped out of the fitted cups. It was made to fit me perfectly, and according to Brook and Sherry, it was. However, to me, it still felt, and looked, like I could pop out of my dress at any moment.

The more I looked at myself, the more I felt like I wasn't wearing a dress. I felt like I was shoved into a teeny, tiny, pale, parachute!

I groaned under my breath.

This was all Theo's fault! He'd put those thoughts and comments in my mind and now I couldn't stop comparing my dress to those comments.

My eyes flicked from one mirror to the next as I tried to stop seeing the dress as something horrible, now.

I covered my face with my hands and groaned.

'I don't like how I look in this,' I muttered, shaking my head.

"What are you talking about?" Sherry asked. "Ciana, you look absolutely gorgeous." "Do I?" I asked, glancing at the mirror between my fingers.

'I think you're just nervous, Ciana. You're getting married and the entire kingdom is going to be there. That is something to get jittery about,' Brook analyzed.

"Yeah..."

She was right.

When Theo had asked me to marry him, I hadn't hesitated in saying yes. Of course, at the time, I thought we'd have the chance to talk about what kind of wedding we wanted. Instead, the royal court had made this huge announcement to the entire kingdom.

Thousands of people were traveling to the capitol to attend the wedding tomorrow. What I thought should have just been friends and family turned into a nationwide event.

Never in all my imaginings had I thought I'd have such a lavish, massive wedding ceremony. Whenever I thought about my wedding, I thought about it being small and intimate. A private celebration with my closest friends and family.

This royal wedding... my skin shivered at the mere thought.

What if I rolled my ankle in the heels while walking down the aisle?

What if I tripped over the dress and planted my face on the ground?

What if I forgot my lines...?

There would literally be thousands of people staring at me and if I messed up or embarrassed myself, it would be in front of the entire kingdom. It would also reflect badly on the crown.

"Ciana," Brook said, cutting into my thoughts.

"Huh?" I asked frantically, my nerves completely frazzled.

'You look gorgeous. You're going to be fine at the wedding because it is your day. Just forget about the rest of the kingdom," she insisted.

'I'll try..." 'Also, you're unsettled because you're pregnant. It's normal to feel emotional and vulnerable during pregnancy, but that does impact your usual confidence. Just breathe through it," Brook suggested.

I took a few deep breaths and closed my eyes. Well, I breathed as deeply as I could with the fitted bodice.

'You've rehearsed the ceremony three times. You've got this, and it is all going to go well," she added.

'I've rehearsed it in front of like ten people. There are going to be thousands there tomorrow!" I cried, overwhelmed all over again.

"And you'll still be fine," Brook assured.

When Brook was done with her adjustments, she helped me out of the dress. Sherry did some last minute touch ups on the makeup after the dress was off.

'Come on, let's get you changed into your own clothes," Brook said, handing me another dress.

It was a simple yet elegant A-line, white dress.

"Brook, this isn't the outfit I was wearing today. " 'Did you forget? King Theo arranged a rehearsal dinner tonight for close friends and family only. Alpha and Luna Black will be there along with Lady Nita. This is the dress His Majesty ordered for the dinner, do you not like it?"



After putting it on, I found myself falling in love with it.

The skirt was light and flowy. In the back, it hung to my ankles but was a little shorter in the front, hanging to my shins. The dress had a high, empire waist, mostly concealing my pregnant belly beneath.

The bodice had scoop cups around my breasts and over the top was a lacey overlay that hid my cleavage and came all the way up to the base of my neck. The dress was sleeveless and the lace met at the back of my neck with a delicate row of satin buttons.

I especially loved the way it showed off my adorable belly and was not overbearing.

'I like it a lot. Honestly, if it was up to me, I'd choose to wear this at my wedding,' I admitted softly, running my hands down the light, flowing skirt. "Lavish clothes just seem so... over the top."

In the mirror, I saw how Sherry and Brook smiled and exchanged a knowing look.

"Come on, we've got to catch the car that is going to take us to dinner," Sherry urged.

'Greg is waiting.

Greg was dressed in a tuxedo in the car. I noticed that Brook and Sherry had also changed into nicer dresses. All three of us got in the car. I eyed them as we drove to the dinner site.

How fancy was this dinner supposed to be?

The car pulled up on top of a hill and stopped to let us out. I recognized this place. I'd been here recently as it was where Theo proposed.

My heart thudded in my chest as I looked at the hilltop and the sun setting over the horizon.

The hilltop was clear except for two old trees that stood side by side. Between the trees an archway made of sticks had been erected.

On the ground below the archway was a circle of flower petals. Wildflowers grew all over the hilltop.

The sky was completely clear of clouds and it was warm and beautiful. The hill overlooked the palace and in the distance there were large, jagged mountains where the sun was setting.

Even though I'd been here before, I'd never imagined that after some decoration, it could be turned into such a stunningly adorable venue!

There was a white, satin carpet laid out as an aisle for me to walk around and just a few chairs where guests would sit. By the number of chairs, there were only a few guests.

Lady Nita was standing under the archway in a midnight blue dress that had sparkles that made her look like the night sky.

Warren was with her too, all dressed up in a tuxedo. I knew he was Theo's best man.

I noticed that all the chairs were on one side of the aisle. On the other, Theo's pets were assembled.

Tears pricked my eyes.

This wasn't a rehearsal dinner, it was a wedding!

Theo had planned my dream wedding for me after all—a small and intimate outdoor ceremony with only the closest friends and our dear family.

It was everything I could ever ask for and the venue was absolutely perfect.

My parents were already seated but when they saw me, they got up and came over to hug me.

‘You look stunning, my dear.’ My dad hugged me tightly and I could almost see a glint in his eyes..

‘He’s been waiting for you,’ my mom smiled, nodding towards the end of the aisle as she put a floor length veil over my head.

I looked at the archway again and I saw Theo standing there with Warren.

He was dressed in an all black suit with a white rose pinned to his lapel pocket. His hair was styled and his lips formed a smile upcurl. The stunning sun was setting behind him, outlining his muscular and slender figure in soft gold.

He was waiting for me patiently. His dark eyes locked on me and just like magnets, I could no longer peel my gaze off him.

My heart continued to hammer in my chest as my dad took my arm and walked me toward the end of the aisle.

Brook stood in front of me with a small bouquet of flowers. She handed me a larger bouquet of white and purple roses with elegant greenery and little bluebells that hung off their stems.

Alexander stood in front of Brook, holding a silk pillow with rings on it.

Greg, Jake, my mother and Nita’s servant, Cedrick, all took their seats.

Sherry sat near the animals and started playing a lovely tune on her harp.

I heard something moving behind me and I turned around to see Perceval. The python positioned himself behind me like the page boy. I didn’t have a train on my dress, but he still followed after me, carrying my long veil instead.

Dottie stood with the animals, the lion, tiger, leopard, and all the others that Theo had tamed and I had befriended.

First, Alexander went down the aisle, then Brook followed. Finally, my father started leading me.

The sun had set by that time and the moon had risen over the mountain peaks. Stars twinkled in the sky with each step I took toward Theo.

I was holding my breath out of sheer joy!

Nita held up her hand and then Sherry stopped playing the music.

‘Who among us gives the bride unto her betrothed?’ Nita asked.

‘I do,’ my father said. He unlooped his arm from mine and kissed my cheek before he went to sit with my mother.

I handed my bouquet off to Brook, who stood by one tree while Warren stood by the other.

Theo took my hands in his and we stood facing each other.

My cheeks flushed as I looked at him and tears welled up in my eyes. The joy inside of me was overwhelming. What else could I feel besides happiness, seeing right in front of me all of my dreams come true in every possible way?

‘Under the light of a full moon and with the blessing of the Goddess, we are gathered here tonight to celebrate the love between Theo Crimson and Ciana Black. May their love only grow, their family flourish, and their future together be long,’ Nita announced.

She motioned to Alexander who brought the rings over.

‘And now, the vows,’ she said.

Theo took one of the rings and slid it on my ring finger.

‘I, King Theodore Crimson, take Ciana Black to be my mate, my wife, and my Luna Queen. With the blessing of the Moon Goddess and all witnesses here, from this night until the end of time, I will love her, cherish her, care for her, and protect her,’ Theo said.

I sniffled and squeezed his hand before he could pull away.

He smirked at me and nodded encouragingly.

I picked up the second ring. Clearing my throat, I blinked the tears away and slid the ring on his finger.

‘I, Ciana Black, take King Theo, to be my mate, my husband, and my Alpha King. With the blessing of the Moon Goddess, from this night until my death, I will love him, honor him, support him, and stand by his side.’

Theo smiled at me, the largest, brightest smile I’d ever seen.

‘I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss!’ Nita exclaimed, holding her arms up in the air.

Theo pounced on me and pulled me against him, kissing me so warmly and passionately. All the air left my lungs and I was dizzy and drunk with joy and love.

And so, our rehearsal dinner became the wedding of my dreams, intimate and beautiful, blessed by close friends and family. Official or not, it couldn’t be a more perfect emblem and start to our happily ever after.

Sold as the Alpha King’s Breeder Chapter 498

\*\*\*Seven Years Later\*\*\* \*Theo\*

Ciana set a bowl of oatmeal in front of Flora and then turned to the mini refrigerator in our suite for a glass of juice.

Although we could have asked the maids to bring food to our rooms, Ciana insisted on making food on her own for our girls once in a while. She said it made her feel like a mother, not just a queen.

'Could you talk to Ava?' she asked, "Make sure that she behaves like a big girl at Flora's birthday party this afternoon."

Ava, our first daughter, was seven-years-old. Today was her little sister Flora's one year birthday, but Ava had been throwing a tantrum for a couple days now.

Ever since Flora was born, Ava had gone through some interesting adjustments. At first, she had loved having Flora around. It had been sweet to watch Ava hold Flora and kiss her cheeks. She'd even pretend to be a "mommy" and read to Flora.

Unfortunately, our Ava had lost interest in playing a motherly role fast. After only three months, Ava started transitioning to becoming clean, prim, and proper. A little princess. She demanded her own bedroom away from the "noisy, smelly, baby," in the nursery.

Of course, Ciana and I had given Ava her own bedroom. Ava loved the freedom, up until Flora had gotten a walker that allowed her to run around the palace and build up her leg muscles. Flora wanted to follow Ava everywhere.

I smiled, shaking my head at the memory. Ava had hated it. She tried to lock herself in her room a couple nights ago, but Flora found a marker and drew all over Ava's bedroom door because she couldn't get in.

Ava was still upset about that. However, today was Flora's birthday party, and Ava needed to figure out a way to get over her issues with her little sister.

'There is a cake for Flora and cupcakes for Ava so she can feel special and included as well,' Ciana added, "the requirements for food are written on the list."

I picked up the piece of paper from the counter and looked it over. It had thorough specifications on color, taste, size, design and required ready time for both the birthday cake and the cupcakes, along with snacks and refreshments lists for the guests.

Ciana had also drawn little hearts and smiley faces at the bottom, which brought a smile on my lips.

It wouldn't be a big party by any means. Despite being the king and the queen, whenever it was possible, Ciana had insisted that we live a lifestyle like ordinary couples and parents. Therefore the birthday party was just a small gathering rather than a grand royal celebration.

'Right, I'll get the food on the list arranged,' I replied, trying to figure out which chef was most suitable for both the birthday cake and the cupcakes. "And talk to Ava." 'Remind Ava that she won't be getting any of her own presents but she will have her own big girl corner with her friends. They'll all get gift bags, which are different from the gifts that Flora will get from guests,' she kept going, 'If Ava is still...'  
'Ciana, I got this,' I said quickly. "Ava will be fine."

After putting the list in my pocket, I leaned down to give a swift kiss on my wife's lips. But the moment I touched her sweet mouth and breathed in her luscious scent, desire started to rise in my body, and the swift kiss turned into a passionate devour of her lips.

As I pulled myself away, I panted, “Fuck! How come after seven years being married to you, you still set my body on fire so easily?” ‘I guess that’s what mates do to each other?’ she replied wittily, her cheeks flushing.

‘Get going, we still have a lot to do for the party and the trip.’

I sighed. She was right. I took a few long breaths in, peeled my gaze off my beautiful wife and headed down the hallway to go to Ava’s room.

Today was a busy day, not only because it was Flora’s first birthday party, but also because right after the party, we would be leaving the palace to have a family vacation for the first time ever.

Ciana, Ava, Flora and I would stop by Ortiz to pay a short visit to my mother, then spend a week with Ciana’s parents in Alvar before we head to a vacation home in the western forest for one month.

I couldn’t suppress the smile on my face. Up until a few years ago, neither “family” nor ‘vacation’ even existed in my vocabulary, but now life was full of joy with the ones I loved.

‘Daddy!’ Ava cheered when I opened her door. She jumped into my arms and hugged me.

I smiled and picked her up, giving her a bear hug.

‘Are you ready to be my helper today?’ I asked, setting her down on the floor.

‘Yes, yes,’ Ava said, beaming up at me.

‘Alright. Today’s Flora’s birthday, let’s go tell the kitchen what to make for her birthday cake.’

However, as soon as I mentioned Flora, Ava’s face fell.

‘Ava, what’s the matter?’ I knew the answer, but I started with my question anyway.

‘Nothing...’ Ava dropped her eyelids.

‘Are you still upset about Flora drawing on your door?’

Ava rolled her eyes. ‘No, I’m a big girl. I wouldn’t act that childish!’

That wasn’t what I expected. I smirked and shook my head. “You know you are a very good big sister. I love you for that.” ‘Do you?’ Ava asked, then she let out a dramatic sigh.

I crouched down to be at the same level as her. “Of course I do. What’s bothering you?”

Ava pouted her lips, and her eyes started to get a little red. “Everyone talks about Flora. They said she was named ‘Flora’ because when she was born, all flowers welcomed her and she’s special.’

I paused for a moment, remembering that it was at the peak of spring while Ciana was in labor carrying Flora. When the sun rose, along with Flora’s cries, new flowers completely covered the hills, as if they bloomed overnight to welcome Flora’s arrival.

People in the palace still talked about that till this day.

Ava continued, “But I’m not special, so you and mommy don’t love me any more.”

I tapped on her cute button nose. "Silly girl, we of course love you. And you're very special too." 'I don't believe you. You're just saying that to make me feel better."

I chuckled and looped her in my arms. "Ava, do you know that you were blessed by the White Queen herself?" 'I was?" Her eyes widened. "Who's the White Queen?" 'She is a very special and powerful lady who has the closest bloodline to the Moon Goddess. She blessed you while you were in mommy's belly. Not only that, you helped bring your mommy back to me. Your name Ava means life. You brought our lives back together."

I smiled softly at her. "You see, not only are you special, but also you're the most helpful girl I've ever met, and we love you with all of our hearts." 'Whoa..." she gaped. I wasn't sure whether she understood everything I told her, but from her expression, I'd assumed she was convinced that she was a special and valuable family member.

'So now, my special girl, are you ready for your sister's party and our vacation?" 'Yes, Daddy! I promise I'll be very helpful from now on!" she exclaimed with a bright smile, but then she tilted her head, blinked at me several times and then said, "Wait a second."

I arched an eyebrow.

'Daddy, if you and mommy," she said as she pointed to herself, "and we are on vacation, who will do your work and look after the country?" \*\*\*

\*Ciana\*

Servants got the royal garden set up for the party. There were streamers, balloons, and toys for young kids.

Ava was happy to be in her "big girl' corner with her friends. Sherry and Greg's two boys, Dottie's three grandkids and some other officers' children.

I carried Flora on my hip, watching Theo chatting to Alistair, the head of Internal Affairs with Alexander standing next to him.

Theo's 17-year-old nephew had grown into a handsome young man. He was almost as tall as Theo, although he still needed time to fully develop his muscles.

Compared to his peers, Alexander was way more mature and composed, like he had been all his life, especially now that he had been trained by the best in academic, military, leadership and combat skills.

Theo and I had agreed that neither of us wanted to be on the throne forever. I'd always wanted to explore the world and eventually, once we figured out our favorite place, we'd settle down and raise our family in peace. Therefore, ever since Theo and I got married, he had been grooming Alexander into becoming the next king.

However, I could totally understand that Alexander might be a bit nervous today.

Why? Because as the crown prince of Egoren, the only heir to the throne, Alexander would be left in charge while we were on vacation.

'Ciana!' Brook's voice pulled me out of my thoughts as she hurried over and gave me a hug. "I miss you so much. Oh, happy birthday, little Flora," Brook said, pinching the baby's cheeks lightly.

'Happy birthday, Flora,' Jake also greeted the baby and turned to me, "It's been a while, Ciana." 'I miss you both too,' I smiled.

'Ciana, I still can't believe you sent us away five years ago!' Brook complained jokingly, 'You have no idea how much I want to be close to you.' 'I didn't send you away,' I chuckled, "All I did was tell Theo that your father was unhappy about Jake not being an Alpha. Theo said Jake's original pack, Regis, still had survivors, and they ought to have a home to return to. He took it upon himself to make Jake the Alpha of Regis pack and gave Jake a packland as your wedding gift. If you have any complaints, you can discuss that with Theo." 'What do you want to discuss with me?' Theo's voice rang from behind me. "Good to see you both." 'Good to see you too, Alpha,' Jake replied, lowering his head. To Jake, Theo would forever be his Alpha. "Brook was just telling Ciana that everything has been going well."

Brook and I exchanged a look and we both giggled a little.

Theo nodded, "That's good to hear. Hopefully, pulling both of you away from your pack for a month won't cause any trouble." 'Not at all, Your Majesty!' Brook jumped in, "Our pack is doing well. In fact, the whole country has been doing well. We were so happy to hear you're taking a break. Don't worry about us, and we'll do everything we can to assist Prince Alexander. You just go enjoy your vacation!"

Jake nodded, "So true. It's well deserved."

I was about to say something when Ava's shouting drew our attention.

'Uncle Warren and Aunt Sophia!'

Warren and Sophia arrived arm in arm and Warren was carrying a big bag of wrapped presents.

'Hello Ava. I love your hairstyle,' Sophia smiled at Ava. 'Is it a little different from the one you had two days ago?' 'Yes! It is!' Ava's eyes sparkled. She had always adored how pretty Sophia was.

Sophia pulled out a shiny crystal hair pin from her purse and told Ava, 'Then I think this pin would work great with it.'

Ava hoorayed at her new hair accessories and ran away to show her friends while I gave Warren and Sophia one armed hugs.

'Happy birthday, Flora, I can't believe how much you've grown in just two days!' Sophia took Flora from my arms to kiss her cheeks before she greeted me and Brook, 'Hi Ciana. Hi Brook.'

Seven years ago, she requested to come back to the palace to pursue her love for Warren while doing her fair contribution for the country. Even till today, I was still surprised by how much her love for Warren had changed her.

Warren and Sophia weren't each other's fated mate, however, they still got married and they seemed to be happy together. To be honest, sometimes, I was quite impressed by Sophia's persistence.

Warren gently poked at Flora's pink face. 'It felt like yesterday when you were just born! In a blink of an eye, you're already one year old!'

Then he turned to me and Theo, 'Are you guys all packed? Also, how's Alex feeling? He must be a bit nervous.'

I spotted Alexander walking towards us, so I told Warren with a smile, "Why don't you ask him yourself?" 'Uncle Warren, Aunt Sophia, Alpha Jake, Luna Brook, you're all here, welcome back to the palace," Alex nodded to each of them like a confident grown-up. I was proud of him still keeping his cool.

'Are you prepared to look after the kingdom while Theo and Ciana are gone?' Warren asked.

Alexander took a deep breath in and nodded his head firmly, "I believe so. I've done my preparations and I think I can handle this."

I knew Alexander had been well-trained. In the past two years, he had been shadowing Theo in most of Theo's meetings. Sometimes, Theo also sent him documents to review, but to hear him say so confidently that he was ready, made all six adults present all pleasantly surprised at his answer.

Warren patted his shoulder and asked the question in my mind too, 'Buddy, I'm happy to hear you're so confident. Just curious, what preparations have you done?'

Alexander gave us another confident nod and pulled out a calendar. "I've been quite nervous ever since the vacation was announced, so I asked uncle Theo for advice. He suggested that I put together a list of what needs to be done in the next month with deadlines and assignees. I finished revising that last night, and I feel much better afterwards."

He showed us his calendar and agenda. Every day, it had scheduled meetings listed as well as the tasks that were due. The tasks were color coded.

Alexander explained, 'Each of the colors represents the assignee. For example, blue is Internal Affairs, so the assignee is Alistair and red is Treasury, so the assignee is Simon.'

Brook commented, "I saw quite a lot of black here, whoever that is, he has a lot of work."

Alexander nodded, "Exactly, those are normally done by the king, and that was why I was very nervous at first."

I couldn't help but ask, 'At first? So now you're not nervous?'

He looked up to me and grinned, "I made some revisions. Look, here."

We leaned closer, and I noticed that above each of the black blocks, there was either a letter "W" or a letter 'J'.

'After much consideration, I split those tasks to Uncle Warren and Alpha Jake. Now I feel much better!' He was very proud of himself.

'Wait, wait, wait... Alex, then what are you doing this whole month if Jake and I are doing your work?' Warren asked.



'Uncle Theo said leaders are not doers. I only need to put the plan together, and hand it to someone else to execute.'

Warren whipped his head to protest Theo, "Theo, you're okay with it? Just because you're on vacation doesn't mean that I've signed up for more work!"

Theo ignored him and looked to Jake, "Jake, do you have any issues with the assignments?"

Jake lowered his head and replied respectfully, "No, Alpha, it's my pleasure."

Theo then looked at Warren with a mischievous grin, "See, Jake didn't have a problem with it, so you should be fine. Alex, great job with the delegation."

Seeing Warren throwing daggers at Theo with his gaze, I couldn't help but break into laughter.

Alexander stood taller, obviously proud of his homework. "Thank you, Uncle Theo, I'm glad to help. Also, I've been thinking about it. If this works out well, you and Ciana should go on vacation more often."

I managed to say, "That's quite considerate of you..."

Alexander sighed, "That way, hopefully you guys have a baby boy soon, and I won't have to do this any more."

I choked myself, and Theo cleared his throat.

This time, it was Warren who laughed out aloud. After he was able to speak again, he gave Alex a thumbs up. "Your Highness, just for what you've said, I gladly accept your assignments!" "Mommy, Daddy," Ava ran over and informed us, "the cake is here. Time for candles and singing!"

Theo and I exchanged a look. I could see the peace and contentment in his eyes as his body relaxed and any tension in my own body was relieved as well.

Everyone seemed to be happy. Alex was growing up very mature, confident and strong, the country would be left in good hands when we went away.

We smiled at each other, more than ready for our long awaited family vacation, more than ready for the next phase of our lives.

-End of Runaway Breeder of the Dark King-

Dear all, thank you so much for reading Runaway Breeder of the Dark King. I couldn't believe the series had reached almost 500 Chapters! I wouldn't be able to do this without your support. Thank you all so much from the bottom of my heart.

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 499

Season4 Mates of the Shadow and Light

◆Lena\* "I heard Cressida Mayfaire got an invitation," Abigail said with a twinkle of mirth in her emerald eyes as she bit down on the straw of her iced coffee.

"Cressida?" Vivienne leaned over the table, arching her brow. "She's lying!"

Abigail shook her head, her red curls bouncing on her shoulders. ‘She told Heather that she received an invitation from Prince Charlie himself, can you believe that? Heather seemed convinced, but I have my doubts-’

“Who cares?” I yawned, stretching my arms over my head. I blinked into the sun beaming through the ceiling height windows of the campus coffee shop that covered our table with golden light, reflecting off the glossy pages of my textbook. We should have been studying for finals. That was the plan, at least. But lately, all my roommates wanted to do was gossip.

“I care! Cressida is the absolute worst, Lena. I’d kill for an invitation to that wedding!” Abigail leaned back in her chair, crossing her legs and giving me a smug look. I knew she was serious. She, like every other girl who attended the Morhan College of Environmental Sciences, a satellite campus of the University of Breles, was obsessed with the three princes of Poldesse. When news broke last year about Prince William’s engagement, the campus went wild. People were crying, literally crying, over losing their chance with him.

“They’re just royals,” I said with annoyance, flipping a page of my textbook.

“Can you imagine being a princess?” Viviene said dreamily, sighing deeply as she swirled her coffee. “All the finery, the dresses-”

“One lucky lady gets to be Luna of Poldesse, too, eventually. The Alpha and Luna haven’t declared which prince inherits the title yet. I bet it’s Charlie. He just has the look about him. He’s a captain, too, you know. I feel like you kinda have to be a ship captain to be Alpha of Poldesse. Did you know the Alpha was once a pirate?” Abigail rattled on and on about the princes as I did my best to focus on my studies, but it was nearly impossible.

“You’re awfully quiet today,” Viviene said as she turned to me, ruffling the pages of my textbook.

I sighed, surrendering to the fact that this study session was a failure, and I would be up all night, once again.

“I have one more final before my field study,” I breathed, reaching for my now tepid cup of tea.

“Do you know where you’re going yet?” Abigail asked, looking somewhat vexed about Viviene changing the subject away from the royal wedding.

“No idea. Professor Adams said somewhere to the north based on my course of study. I’m hoping for the rural camp that’s studying the redwoods near Red Lakes, but that placement is so competitive!” I was frantic about it but stifled the urgency in my voice. I was studying botany and was in my final semester of school. I wanted nothing more than to spend my life in the wilderness, alone, plucking leaves and flowers and pressing them between the pages of books. I’d done so all my life, and I’d had to fight tooth and nail to get my parents to allow me to move to Finadli to pursue my studies. Researching the never-ending, untamed, and unexplored forest in north-western Finaldi was my dream.

But it felt unreachable at the moment.

“I bet you get it-” Viviene began, but she was interrupted by Abigail leaning forward and reaching over the table to peer closely at me.

“You got your hair done again!”

I blinked, then subconsciously reached up to touch the golden blonde locks that were spilling over my shoulders. “Just lowlights-”

“See, Viv? If anyone has a chance with the princes, it’s Lena. Cressida is blonde. Megan, that fiancée of Prince William’s, is blonde. I’m going blonde!”

Viviene giggled as she twirled a lock of her dark brown hair around her finger, shaking her head.

I rolled my eyes, closing my textbook and gathering my things as the conversation shifted back to the topic that everyone had been talking about lately, nonstop.

I was just about to stand when Heather, our other roommate and my closest friend, burst through the door of the cafe, her black hair falling around her face as she frantically looked around until she spotted our table.

“Holy shit, you guys!” she exclaimed, dropping her textbooks on the table with a thud as she took a seat next to me. “You’ll never guess who asked to join my study group!”

“Goddess, Heather! Did you run here from the Natural Sciences building?” Abigail teased.

Heather was panting, trying to catch her breath as she adjusted her weight in her chair. She was a zoology student who was specializing in the effects of botanical materials on specific groups of animals. Her field was large animal medicine, and she was one of the few students who had been accepted into the program. Morhan was a prestigious college, and she, unlike Abigail and Viviene, took her studies seriously.

“Who?” Viviene pressed, offering Heather a sip of her coffee. Heather accepted, mouthing her thanks as she reached up to wipe sweat from her brow. “I was just minding my own business, you know, right after our study group disbanded for the day and... you guys. I’m not exaggerating when I say I thought I was dreaming!”

“Get on with it!” Abigail exclaimed. I looked around the table, unable to hide my smile as my friends leaned closer to Heather, their eyes wide with anticipation.

“Xander Smith walked up to me and asked if there was any room in our group,” Heather whispered. Abigail and Viviene gasped, but I leaned back in my chair, crossing my arms over my chest.

Speaking of royalty; Xander Smith was the closest you could get, at least on campus.

He was a transfer student from the University of Mirage, apparently. He was one of those tall, dark, and handsome types that drove everyone absolutely nuts. But he was brooding, and standoffish, which for some people made him even more desirable.

I’d only seen him once or twice over the semester. He wasn’t in any of my classes, and our paths never crossed. I had never even thought about him unless he was brought up in conversation.

“AND!” Heather exclaimed, raising her hand to shush the excited murmurs of surprise coming from Abigail and Viviene. “He asked about you, Lena.”

“Me?” I choked.

Heather nodded vigorously, taking a deep breath before she continued.

“He asked me about my blonde friend, with the blue eyes, who stands about this tall-” she motioned with her hand to accurately describe my five-foot-two-inch stature. ‘I said, who, Lena? And Goddess, Lena, he growled your name. I swear. The way he said it was something out of a romance novel.”

I could feel the blush rising over the collar of my crewneck sweatshirt. I glanced over at Abigail, who was gaping at Heather. Abigail looked slightly disappointed, but I knew she’d get over it. Abigail was what we, mostly lovingly, called a hunter. A hunter was someone old enough to feel the mate bond but had no interest in settling down just yet. She had a long list of trophies from past sexual escapades... but nothing like Xander. He was untouchable. The ultimate prize.

And he was asking about ME?

I felt a little hot as I reached into my backpack for the claw clip I always carried around. I wound my waist length hair into a tight coil, pinning it in place so the chilled air could touch my neck.

Me? What the hell did Xander want with me?

“He asked if she was in my study group, and I said no, because she studies botany and not zoology, and he seemed disappointed-”

“Wow,” Abigail said, leaning back in her chair. She shifted her gaze from Heather to me, shrugging one shoulder. “Good for you, Lena. The King of Morhan College wants to date you.”

“I don’t-” I began, but my voice was drowned out by Vivene’s questions as Heather continued to chatter about her run-in with Xander, and his desire to know me.

“He asked if I could set you up-” Heather began, but her voice faded as I thought of the last date I had been on. My first, and last, date.

I swallowed, then glanced down at the dainty wrist watch my mom had given me for my birthday a few years ago, realizing I had exactly seventeen minutes to scurry across campus to my afternoon class if I wanted to avoid the consequences of that date and the aftermath that had followed it.

“I have to go,” I said as I stood and hurriedly stuffed my textbook into my backpack. I ignored the exclams of protest from my friends as I walked away, glancing down at my watch once more.

Sixteen minutes.

I walked briskly across the campus square where students lingered around the fountain, past the Natural Sciences building, tucking my hands in my pockets and keeping my head low as I hurried along. The building that housed the general education classes for first-year students was up ahead on my left, and I gave it a quick glance, cursing under my breath as people began to funnel out the front doors.

Had my watch been slow? Did class get out early?

The greenhouses where I took the majority of my classes were up ahead, situated at the end of the pathway lined by massive oak trees. It was fall, and the trees were a deep, burnt orange in the soft midday sun. If I wasn't walking at almost a jog, I would have slowed my pace to enjoy the view.

But I was, under no circumstances, interested in subjecting myself to the fervent advances of the man I had gone on one single, lousy date with—a man who wouldn't leave me the hell alone.

"LENA!"

I grimaced, picking up my pace as Slate's voice ripped through the air. I knew he had seen me walk by. He had likely been waiting for me to pass, watching me from the window. He was an adjunct professor and taught the first-year students how to form proper sentences and stuff like that, but he had a chip on his shoulder—a power complex. And he was obsessed... with me.

"LENA!" he said, practically screaming it as he ran up behind me. I almost broke into a run but didn't want to cause a scene. I felt him grip the back of my backpack, pulling me to a halt. He spun me around, taking me by the shoulders. "Are you running away from me?"

"Yes!" I bit out, red in the face and not in the mood for his games. He rolled his eyes, which were a strange, pale Slate to match his name. He would have been handsome, and maybe he was at one point, had it not been for the thinness of his fine, tawny blond hair that was receding even though he was only thirty, and the creepy way he smiled when he looked at me, like I was prey.

"Come on, Lena. You can't still be mad at me—"

"You showed up at my apartment, Slate, in the middle of the night—"

"That was one time... in the last week," he purred, tightening his grip on my shoulders as I tried to pull away. No one else was around, and it was dark here in the shadows of these tall trees, giving the entire scenario a creepy quality I didn't like. "I know what you wanted, you know. I can feel those things with you—"

"No, you can't," I growled, attempting to get out of his grip once more. Slate had it in mind that we were mates, and after three months of following me around campus and being an absolute stalker, he hadn't let up.

It had gotten worse, actually, with him loitering outside of the apartment I shared with Heather, Abigail, and Vivienne in the cozy college town just off campus at odd hours, throwing gravel at my window in the middle of the night to get my attention. Heather and Abigail wanted to kill him, but Vivienne thought it was somewhat romantic.

"You've only got a few more months until you realize I was right," he teased, leaning in to whisper in my ear. His mouth was so close to mine, and I was practically backed against a tree with no way to escape if he tried to kiss me. "And then you'll see the error of your ways. I promise I won't punish you for ignoring me. And when you finally feel the mate bond and let me into your bed—"

"What's going on here?" came a deep voice from behind me. I froze, watching as Slate's eyes shifted slightly up to look into the face of whoever had spoken. "How about you let her go?"

“She’s my girlfriend,” Slate stammered, his cheeks reddening furiously as he tightened his grip on my shoulders, trying to drag me closer to him. I dug in my heels and pushed against him, but he didn’t relax his grip. Suddenly, a large hand was around Slate’s neck.

“It wasn’t a suggestion,” said the voice as the hand tightened around Slate’s throat.

Slate’s eyes widened in surprise as he immediately released his hold on me.

My mystery savior let go of Slate as Slate staggered backward, holding his throat and choking. I slowly turned around, squinting into the sun as I came face to face with Xander, the King of Morhan College.

Sold as the Alpha King’s Breeder Chapter 500

\*Lena\*

Slate was sputtering, spitting on the ground, and acting overall exceedingly dramatic as he gripped his throat. His hands had caused more redness than Xander’s had, I noticed, as I watched Slate act as though Xander had come close to killing him instead of physically forcing him to let me go.

Xander continued to stand behind me, watching Slate with interest. He glanced down at me, giving me a tight, crooked smile before turning his attention back to Slate.

“You done? Or do you need a few more minutes to collect yourself?” Xander asked.

Slate glared at us both, his eyes narrowing into slits as he finally straightened up. ‘Who the hell do you think you are? I’m a professor-‘

“A professor who just had his hands on a female student,” Xander retorted, shrugging his shoulders.

“And you said she’s your girlfriend, right? I expect the administration would look down on that, if they were to find out.”

Slate balked, then licked his lips, turning his gaze to me.

“Don’t look at her,” Xander said sharply, causing Slate to avert his gaze from me and turn his attention to Xander once more.

Slate eyed the duffle bag Xander had slung over his left shoulder, which had “Morhan Varsity Wrestling” embroidered in large, bold letters on the side. Xander had at least six inches on Slate, towering over him even to cast a shadow over the entirety of Slate’s body. I fought against the smirk twitching in the corner of my mouth as the blood drained from Slate’s face.

Not that I’d needed Xander’s help. I would’ve figured out how to get away-eventually.

“You’ll regret this,\* Slate said weakly, glancing at me so quickly I almost missed it. ‘My uncle is the dean-”

“Ah, playing that card, are we?” Xander drawled, adjusting his weight. He yawned, actually yawned, as Slate’s cheeks began to burn a deep crimson. “I think you’d better go.”

“Let’s go, Lena-\* Slate began.

“No. You go, alone. And if I catch you anywhere near her again, you’ll be the one with regrets.”

I stole a look at Xander. His gaze was fixed on Slate with such intensity it made me want to cower by association. I hadn't ever seen him so close up before.

I already knew, based on my few sightings of him around campus, that he was tall. But I hadn't noticed how dark his hair was, ink-black and swept back away from his face, curling softly around his ears. I hadn't noticed his eyes, which were a rich, coffee-like color flaked with amber. He was beautiful, even dressed in gray sweatpants and a black windbreaker.

I hadn't noticed that Slate had walked away until Xander slowly turned his gaze to me, meeting my eye. Time stood still.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "He didn't hurt you, did he?"

"No," I said, swallowing hard as I tore my gaze away from his eyes and watched Slate's figure disappear down the pathway toward the campus square. "I'm fine."

"You're not really his girlfriend, are you?"

I shook my head, glancing back up at him. "Goddess, no!"

He chuckled, exhaling as he rested his hand on the duffle bag he was carrying.

"I didn't think so, but I wanted to be sure. That guy is a creep. Does he bother you a lot?"

"Yeah, actually. He always tries to stop me when I'm on my way to the greenhouses. He teaches right there." I pointed to the building Slate had come out of.

Xander nodded, scanning the building, then turning to look up the pathway toward the set of long greenhouses at the top of the hill.

"How often do you have to walk this way?" he asked.

"Um, three days a week. Wednesday through Friday."

"Well tomorrow I'll walk you to your class," he said, but then paused, clearing his throat as he looked down at me once more, 'if that's alright with you?"

"You don't have to do that-"

"It's on my way, actually. I have practice at the stadium every day around this time." He tilted his head up the pathway, where the roof of the somewhat worn-down stadium was visible above the trees in the distance. Morhan was known for its academics, not its sports.

I gave Xander another once over, wondering why the hell he was even here. The rumor was that he was a transfer student from the University of Mirage, which was, in fact, known for its athletics. He was studying something related to Heather's chosen field, I knew that much. But he was truly a mystery in every other respect. There really weren't guys like him at Morhan. He stuck out.

"I'm Xander, by the way," he said, holding out his hand for me to shake.

"I know," I replied, then paled, tucking my hands in my pockets. He arched his brow, giving me a playful look as he narrowed his eyes.

“Oh? What else do you know about me?” He dropped his hand, possibly disappointed I hadn’t shaken it.

What was I supposed to say? That every girl on campus was obsessed with him? Except for me, of course. That they referred to him as the “King” of Morhan College?

That my friend had already told me he was asking about me?

“I need to get to class. I like to be early,” I said in a rushed murmur, giving him a tight-lipped smile. I started to walk away, feeling his gaze lingering on my back as I took a few paces forward before I turned around to face him once more.

“I’m Lena,” I said.

“I know,” he said in a teasing voice, smiling at me. “So, are you going to let me be your bodyguard? Or are you able to fend for yourself?”

“I don’t know. I think he’s harmless-”

“He had his hands on you, Lena,” Xander said as he took a few steps in my direction. The way he’d said my name sent a shockwave through my body. I blinked, swallowing back the heat that was rippling over my arms and chest. I’d never really been attracted to anyone the way I was attracted to Xander at that moment. It was physical, downright animalistic.

I wondered, briefly, what he looked like underneath his windbreaker. I couldn’t think about that. It was stupid. I was almost ready to graduate and wasn’t here to meet a boy!

“Okay, fine,” I said, my voice trembling as I nodded my acceptance of his offer, “You can walk me to class on Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays. I study with my friends at the cafe in the commons if... if you want to meet there.”

“That would be fine,” he smiled, “as long as you’re comfortable being seen with me.”

Ah, there it was. He knew he was popular. He knew, and liked, the fact that people fawned over him. I could see it in his eyes, some unspoken challenge. He could have any girl on campus if he wanted to. He wouldn’t even have to ask. Why was he interested in me?

“I’m fine with it as long as you keep Slate away from me,” I said, my voice a little harsher than I meant it to be. My tone didn’t seem to change anything for Xander, however. He adjusted the duffle bag and motioned to the pathway.

“Well, after you!”

I found it nearly impossible to focus on class as it dragged on. I was standing at one of the long, plastic tables in the center of the greenhouse, testing soil and writing my findings on a clipboard. My professor was walking around, chatting with the handful of other senior botany students, her hands tucked behind her back as she nodded down at their clipboards.

This was one of my last classes in the greenhouses. Next week was finals, at least for me. Then, by the grace of the Goddess, I would be packing my bags for the research camp in Red Lakes for my six-week long field study-1 hoped.



I should have been focusing, testing my skills. But Xander's voice kept replaying in my mind.

He'd dropped me off at the front gates of the sprawling research garden a little over an hour ago, but I could still feel his gaze on the back of my neck, like he had branded me. It was polite of him to walk me to class, and to offer to do so again and again over the next week.

But I couldn't help but feel like his intentions weren't totally chivalrous.

I was a straight-A student. I'd spent the last three and a half years focused solely on my studies. I didn't go to parties. I didn't go to the bar in town. I didn't date. I was at Morhan on a full academic scholarship, and had been only seventeen when I came here as a freshmen. I wasn't one to give up a single minute of my time for a man, that was for sure.

I'd learned my lesson with Slate. It had been a blind date set up by Abigail and the guy she had been seeing at the time. Abigail hadn't known that her boyfriend's friend was actually a professor at Morhan, and I'd been shocked, and uncomfortable, when Slate walked into the cozy downtown Breles restaurant for the double date while I was spending a weekend away during the break in the summer semester.

Slate's attraction to me had been immediate and exaggerated. I hadn't felt anything for him but annoyance, and a major "ick."

Xander had only walked me to class, and now the fluttering in my heart wouldn't stop. He was hot, I could admit that. But I'd always been focused on my studies over dating.

I wasn't going to get wrapped up in fleeting feelings now, especially being so close to graduation. I closed my eyes for a moment, taking a deep breath. I effectively pushed Xander out of my mind, and turned my attention back to the task at hand.

I looked up as the doors to the greenhouse opened and two school administrators stepped inside, dressed in suits. One of them lingered at the door, obviously afraid to take any further steps into the greenhouse lest he get soil on his shiny leather loafers. The only one, however, started walking toward my professor. He glanced at me as he passed by my table, narrowing his eyes.

I watched the man approach my professor and pull her aside, leaning toward her to talk discreetly into her ear. She paled, then looked confused, and began to argue with him.

I clicked my pen closed and slid it into the pocket of my apron, watching as the two of them continued to speak in low, inaudible tones. My classmates were watching with interest, and those closest to the conversation had begun to whisper, their eyes moving in my direction.

I bristled at the attention, glancing from my classmates to my professor, whose cheeks were flushed as she screwed her mouth into a tight line, eventually motioning in my direction.

Suddenly the administrator who had been talking to my professor was in front of my workspace.

"Lena? You're wanted in the dean's office, immediately," he said, then he motioned toward the door of the greenhouse. I bristled, looking at my professor for help.

"But I have another half hour of class--"

“Now,\* the man said sharply, which sent a jolt of unease up my spine. I quickly gathered my books, stuffing them into my backpack as the soft murmurs of speculation from my classmates began to grow in volume.

“Am I in trouble for something?” I asked as I followed the two administrators out the door and onto the pathway.

“Misconduct,” the man with the shiny shoes said over his shoulder, smirking at me before turning forward again.

I flushed, clutching the straps of my backpack as we walked toward the main square.

There was only one explanation for this. Slate had made good on his promise. I would regret snubbing him, especially in front of Xander.