

Kings Breeder 561

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 561

Xander

Fire was burning behind Lena's eyes, and it wasn't the reflection of the sunset turning her pale gray irises a fiery red, no. Poor Charlie. He looked utterly confused at her sudden wrath. She looked exquisite in her blood red gown, but with her cheeks and eyes flaming, she looked more like a demon born from ash and embers than a regal princess.

"Lena, let's just take a step back—" I tried to say, but her gaze flicked to me, her mouth pulling at the corners to form a tight line.

"What the hell are you talking about, Charlie?" she snapped.

Charlie arched his brow, shifting his weight as he opened and closed his mouth like a fish. "Mom isn't going to be a White Queen—"

"But she is a White Queen!"

Lena looked incredibly young at the moment. She was ready to start stomping her foot, her fists clenched and trembling at her sides. I painfully realized, for the first time, what she was up against, and why she'd been fighting tooth and nail against her family for her entire life.

None of this was up to her. This was her blood, the very air that she breathed.

"Not like... not like you are—" Charlie said in a low warning tone, his eyes flicking to me, then back to her. He tilted his head in her direction, trying to physically get his point across.

"Because of her powers?" I asked, crossing my hands over my chest.

Lena sniffed indignantly, swallowing hard with her jaw set, and flexed. Charlie eyed me up and down, then gave me a single tight nod.

"So you know?"

"A bit," I answered. "What exactly does this mean for her? She's being crowned—"

"I have no idea how any of this works," Charlie bit out before Lena could cut in, holding his hand out to silence her. "I just know our grandpa isn't in the best of health and is refusing help from everyone. Our grandma wants to step back from her duties and spend what time she has left with him, you know."

"Is it really that serious?" Lena said, her voice breaking.

Charlie only shrugged, looking into the depths of his bottle of beer.

"I was under the impression he couldn't die, you know, from what our moms told us," she said.

"What?" I said, shaking my head as if I had sand stuck in my ear. "I'm sorry, I don't think I heard you correctly—"

“You did,” Lena replied, her words sharpened like a blade. “Welcome to the fantasy that is our family, Xander.”

Charlie smirked, not making eye contact with either of us.

“I really don’t understand what you meant by that,” I pressed, my mind reeling. “Can you, uh—”

“It doesn’t matter, Xander. Why do you even care?” Lena snapped.

Charlie glared at her. “Chill out, Lena. Don’t take this out on him!”

“Don’t tell me to chill out!”

I watched as Charlie and Lena began to hurl insults, their faces growing redder and redder as fury rustled the sand between them. At first, I didn’t see much of a resemblance between Lena and her family members. But seeing her and Charlie go toe to toe, well... the similarities weren’t physical, that was for sure. But the Gray family temper was obviously prolific.

“I need—Lena, hey! HEY!” I barked, raising my voice above the sound of their argument.

They turned to me, each breathing heavily. I saw it then, the shape of their eyes. They were the same, but Charlie’s were a deep, steel gray.

My heart squeezed as I turned my gaze to Lena, seeing her as what she truly was—a Goddess, born into a tight-knit, loving family, but she hadn’t been able to escape the blatant fact that she was different. Her eyes were such a pale gray, catching every color around her. Her hair was white and straight, her facial features still striking, but they didn’t hold weight to the unique beauty of her mother, and her aunt, and her grandmother.

Lena was different. She always had been, and she always would be.

And it was ripping her to pieces.

No wonder she’d spent the past three years pretending to be just... normal.

“What happens now?” I asked, looking between them. “And are you saying your grandfather is... immortal?”

Charlie and Lena looked at me, then at each other, and laughed. Some of the tension left my shoulders as they continued to laugh, their eyes wide with mirth.

“Goddess, I hope not,” Charlie sputtered. I glared at him, tapping my fingers on my thigh while I waited for them to compose themselves.

“They share a soul, from what I understand,” Lena said, wiping a few tears from her cheeks. “He went rogue, a long time ago now. It... it damages the soul, you know, strips it from your body. Grandma used a flower called the Moonlight Lily to bring him back, but in order to do that she had to use her blood, giving him her life force. They’re connected now. If they die... well, it’ll be together, no matter how long he lets himself suffer.”

I blinked a few times. It wasn’t totally unbelievable, not after the magic berries and crystals and all of that in my own realm.

"I didn't realize a White Queen could step down from her post. I thought it was something they were until their deaths."

"The last few White Queens died young, from what we know, up until my grandmother," Charlie said with a shrug. "Lena was born for this—"

"I wasn't born for this," she whispered, and I could hear the pain laced through her voice as she spoke. She was hugging herself as if she was cold. I wanted to reach out and take her into my arms, but I knew she'd flinch away from me.

"You're the f*cking Moon Goddess reincarnate, Lena," Charlie pressed, and hearing him speaking the words hit me like a freight train. I'd known, of course, that her differences meant something unearthly and divine. Her untested powers weren't just rare; they were totally unheard of.

And she'd known this, all her life.

"But if I'm not, and everyone's been wrong—"

"You are," Charlie and I said in unison.

Silence fell between the three of us, broken only by a drunken chuckle from Oliver, who was still asleep behind us.

The golden hour had passed, and a violet shadow crept over the beach, sending a blue-black haze over the group of us. In the soft purple light, Charlie was simply enveloped in darkness, his features blurred.

But this was Lena's best light. Her eyes didn't darken—they glowed, the flakes of blue around her irises giving depth to her opal-like gaze, like two moons nestled against a blanket of stars.

Her skin glittered, and the wine-red dress took on a purple hue, a cloak of night.

Night—that was when she was at her best. I could see who, and what, she was clearly now.

What the hell had I been thinking by leaving my mark on her?

"When does Grandma plan on stepping down from her throne?" Lena asked after a moment.

I watched her, her eyes fixed on Charlie, every line and curve of her face strained.

Charlie puffed his cheeks, then blew out his breath, shaking his head slowly from side to side.

"Was no one going to tell me?" she continued, her voice catching in her throat.

"I didn't know you hadn't been told, okay?" Charlie replied. He looked uncomfortable, and he glanced up at the narrow set of stairs leading back up to the bluff where that palace sat atop it, the twinkling lights of the garden just visible through the thick belt of palms.

I ran my tongue along the inside of my bottom lip, then sighed and extended my hand to Lena.

"Let's go back up to the reception—"

"I'm not feeling well," she said without looking at either of us, her eyes fixed on the cloudless, twilight sky over the water.

“Then I’ll take you to your room,” I said as calmly as possible, flexing my hand and urging her to take it.

She stared out at the water for a moment longer before she met my eye, tears lining her lashes. She took my hand, and I lightly squeezed her fingers. Her face softened at my touch, and that bond between us quivered. Charlie cleared his throat, tipping his beer toward us in farewell.

“I’m gonna stay with him, for a while at least,” he said, tilting his head toward Oliver, who was now grinning like an i***t in his drunken stupor.

I touched Lena’s hand in the crook of my arm and we were off, walking side by side down the beach.

It would have been exceedingly romantic had it not been for the crushing weight of birthrights and unwanted responsibilities pressing down on our shoulders.

“It’s going to be okay,” I said to her.

She looked up at me, her eyes misted and shining in the faint moonlight beginning to creep over the sand.

“Are you saying that to me, or to yourself?”

“To both of us,” I breathed, glancing down at her and giving her a tight smile.

She frowned, sniffing and tilting her chin toward the bluff. “I don’t want to be the White Queen, Xander.”

“I know.”

“I don’t think you understand—”

“Do you think my title is something I wanted, or ever aspired to?”

She let out her breath, her eyes narrowing as she looked over at me. We’d reached the stairs, but instead of letting go of my arm, she paused as though she couldn’t take a step further.

“How did you become the Alpha King?” she asked.

I sighed, flexing my jaw as I turned to look out over the water before turning back to her and motioning for her to walk up the stairs. “That’s a story for another time,” I murmured, but she stood firm.

“I want to know—”

“It was given to me,” I said, my voice more biting than I’d meant for it to be. “It wasn’t something I wanted, or was ready for. But I didn’t have a choice, like you. I had to do what my family needed me to do.”

“Why did you need to do it?”

“Lena.” I ran my fingers through my hair.

She walked up a single step of the stairs, then another, and then another until we were truly eye to eye.

“Why did you do it, if you didn’t want to?”

“Because I didn’t view it as a death sentence like you do. I could do this for my family and still pursue everything I wanted. Do you not see what kind of position being the White Queen would put you in? The power you’d hold? You’d be the most powerful woman in your realm, Lena. You could do whatever you wanted.”

“I don’t think it works like that—”

“You don’t know how it works because you haven’t given it a chance.”

“And what about us, then?” she asked, her cheeks coloring as she clamped her mouth shut. She hadn’t meant to say it out loud, that was for certain.

I gave her my best boyish, sly grin and arched a brow. The look had never worked on her, and I’d tried a thousand times over the past few months. She looked right through me every single time—

“Ow!” I hissed, rubbing the spot where her fist had collided with my chest. “What was that for?”

“I’m trying to be serious, Xander.”

“Maybe being serious is your problem.”

“And what do you suggest I do, Xander?”

“It’s Alpha King Alexander,” I teased, which elicited a rush of color to her cheeks once again. She glared as I stepped onto the stairs, closing the distance between us.

“I suggest,” I began, “loosening up a bit. Can you do that, for just one night?”

Sold as the Alpha King’s Breeder Chapter 562

Lena

Xander shut my bedroom door behind him, the sound of the party going on downstairs dying down to faint vibration as he snapped the lock shut.

I closed my eyes as I walked forward, chasing the moonlight filtering through the silken curtains letting in the breeze off the balcony.

Maybe I’d been wrong. I’d been looking at this all the wrong way. For so long, being a White Queen meant losing control of my own destiny.

But Xander had been... he’d been right. I’d be queen. I’d have responsibilities, sure. I’d have a duty to my lands, my people, and my family.

But I’d still be me, deep down. Right?

“Do you need help with that?”

I hadn’t realized I was fumbling with the laces on the back of my dress until Xander’s voice filled the room. I felt his fingers against my back, his fingertips grazing my skin as he undid each strap. I felt my bodice loosen, and clasped my breasts to prevent my dress from falling as I turned around to face him.

I meant to thank him, but before I could say anything at all, he said, “Did anyone mention the mark?”

He traced it with his finger, the feeling of his skin on mine sending a thrill of heat through me.

“I’m sure people saw.”

“And what do you think they’ll say?”

“I don’t really care,” I whispered, closing my eyes as he continued to run his touch over my mark, then my collarbone.

“That’s a first,” he breathed, a hint of mirth in his voice.

“Thank you for helping me with my dress. You can go now.” I set my jaw, staring up into his eyes. My body was screaming for him not to go. But my heart and my mind were fighting over what was right.

We’d broken up, right? There was a reason for that. Xander hadn’t told me the whole truth. Not even a sliver of it. We’d gone to the wedding together, technically, even though I’d spent the majority of the reception with my friends and then on the beach with him and Charlie.

But after everything that had happened, and everything he now knew about me, he was still here, standing only inches away from me, wanting me.

And not because I was a White Queen, at least almost. I knew him well enough to know he didn’t just want me to gain access to my powers. There was something else there, something true, something real.

“How would this work?” I asked, knowing he’d understand the meaning.

He was looking at the mark, tracing it like he was in some sort of trance. He met my eye, the flakes of amber around his irises faintly yellow in the moonlight, like little sparks of fire against dark, endless night.

“I don’t know,” he answered, then tilted his head to the side to get a better view of my face. “But it sounds like we have a few weeks to come up with something.”

“You rule in an entirely different realm—”

“We’ll figure it out,” he interrupted, holding his hand out to silence me then reaching down to run the back of knuckles along my jaw.

The fire in his touch ignited that spark within me that only he had access too. I swallowed, working against the lump in my throat as I held his gaze.

He brushed a kiss against my cheek, the tip of my nose, and the edge of my jaw. His breath tickled my ear and neck as his lips lingered on my skin, sending little sparks of heat rippling over my body. I closed my eyes as his lips met mine in the gentleness, briefest kiss.

Then, he kissed me fully, his tongue grazing my lower lip in a bid to open up to him, to let him in—to trust him.

And I did.

I kissed him back with as much fervor as he had shown me, and in a matter of seconds he'd pulled my dress down, freeing my breasts from the fabric. I sighed low in my throat as his hands caressed my breasts, kneading them against his palms as he backed me up against the bed.

I ripped at his shirt, little tortoise shell buttons shooting this way, and that way, pinging off the far wall.

He chuckled, arching a brow as he yanked hard on my bodice, ripping it open at seams. I sucked in my breath in surprise, but before I could protest the destruction of my dress, he lifted me up, holding me by my bottom and then tossing me onto the bed.

"I'll buy you a new one," he growled as he pulled the remains of the dress down over my thighs. The silken fabric grazed my naked skin, sending a rush of heat through my core and belly.

My breasts were bare and fully exposed to him, dusted with the moonlight drifting through the open door leading out onto the balcony. I was wearing lacy red lingerie, however, the same color as my dress, and garters around my upper thighs to hold up the sheer silk stockings that covered my calves. He stared at me for a moment, his eyes drifting down from my navel to the tip of my toes.

"Now, who were you wearing all of this for?" he asked, his voice gravely and dripping with desire.

"For you," I breathed, my breath catching in my throat as he slid a finger under one of the garters and pulled it, snapping it back against my skin.

He was out of his pants in a split second, climbing on top of me and covering my neck and chest in kisses. I arched my back, desperate for him, for the feeling of his heated skin on my bare breast and his touch between my legs. He pulled my panties to the side, and in a single thrust, sheathed himself to the hilt.

I cried out, panting as my nails bit into his skin. I held onto him for dear life, tangling my fingers in his hair as he moved within me, bringing me closer and closer to the edge.

"I love you," he whispered against my mouth, sucking on my lower lip as I cried out in ecstasy.

I believed him. I knew that he did. And part of me was okay with this being the only way he could show me that love.

We'd been playing this game for months; making up, f*****g, breaking up again. If I was going back to Mirage, well, at least I'd have this night to look back on and cherish, whatever may come next.

"I love you, too," I said against his neck as his movements slowed and became more deliberate. He was taking his sweet time, and soon I was riding another wave of pleasure that shot from my core all the way down to my toes, making them curl.

We could have been at it for hours, I didn't know. But eventually, I closed my eyes with my head resting against his arm and his body curled around mine. Neither of us slept deeply, not with the thrum of the party still sending vibrations through the floor. Every once in a while he'd speak, lingering on the edge of sleep, and give me some idea or option about how we could possibly be together, for real—for life.

The stars were still out in full when Xander finally drifted into sleep, but I remained awake, lost in the scent of him and the feeling of his skin against my cheek.

There was a soft rustling outside the door, and then a scratch, then another. Xander stirred, turning his head to look over at the door.

A whine sounded through the room, and I sat straight up in bed, nearly elbowing Xander in the face as I threw off the cover.

“Oh, no! Poor thing, I didn’t even think—” Grabbing my robe, I padded over to the door as Xander sat up in surprise, his eyes trailing my movements. I opened the door to the darkened hallway, and Xander sucked in his breath.

“What the hell is that?” he asked, eyes wide as the desperately old dog limped into the room, his lean silver body curved with age.

“This is Duck,” I said matter-of-factly as I patted Duck on the head.

His tongue lolled out of the side of his mouth as he leaned against my leg, his large eyes glassy with cataracts.

“Duck?”

“Yes—”

“How old is that thing?” Xander said in surprise, sitting up a little straighter as I gently scooped Duck into my arms and carried him to bed. Xander’s brows furrowed as Duck sniffed his toes, then turned his narrow face in Xander’s direction.

‘Who?’ Duck said into my mind, and I smiled, patting Xander’s ankle.

As far as I knew, only Maeve, my mother, and I could mind-link with Duck. It was some odd, rare ability from what I understood.

“A friend. It’s alright, you can lay down—” I said aloud.

Duck did as he was told, but kept a careful eye on Xander as I slid back into the bed. “He’s older than me,” I said softly.

Xander narrowed his eyes. “How old?”

“I don’t actually know. I don’t think anyone is totally sure. Twenty-three or four, maybe—”

“You’re telling me there’s a twenty-four-year-old dog in our bed right now?”

“My bed, first of all. And I’m willing to bet he’s been looking for a quiet place and a warm body to sleep next to all night.”

Xander relaxed a little, looking down at Duck with an air of sympathy. He hesitantly reached out and patted Duck on the head.

“I’ve never seen a dog this close up before,” he admitted as he laid back down.

“He’s been through hell and back,” I replied, my eyes feeling heavy. I removed my robe and slid back under the covers.

Duck was curled in a ball between us, his long greyhound tail tucked beneath his chin.

I was unable to hold my eyes open much longer as sleep crept up my legs and belly. Xander reached out and stroked my cheek, a soft smile touching his face.

Sometime later, my eyes drifted open to soft early morning sunlight. I looked over at Xander and smiled to myself before exhaling and closing my eyes once more. Xander had his arm around Duck, holding the dog to his chest, the two of them snoring softly as golden rays of light dusted their cheeks.

Happy, that’s what this was. That’s what I felt. I was at peace, and I had the one thing that truly mattered to me in my bed. We’d talk about things later... about Crimson Creek, about our future.

Whatever came next... well, I was ready. But I was going to sleep a little longer.

Just a bit longer.

Sold as the Alpha King’s Breeder Chapter 563

Xander

Breakfast was being served buffet style in the cozy, informal dining and kitchen area in the back of the palace, closest to the guest’s wing of the behemoth that was the family home of the Alpha of Poldesse.

I’d never witnessed anything like this place. The size of the palace was similar to the one back in Egoren, which would cover the same amount of ground taken up by a small village. That didn’t include the acreage, cabanas, and guest cottages that dappled the palace’s extensive grounds. But unlike the palace in Egoren, this place was open, immaculately clean, and didn’t seem nearly as full of dark places and secrets.

And given the amount of people, not including Lena’s extended family, it had been damn near impossible to sneak out of her room when I woke the morning after the wedding and make it back to my room unseen.

I’d turned the corner to the hallway near my room and ran right into Georgia and Vicky, Lena’s elderly Great Aunts.

There had been no formal greeting fit for an Alpha King from these two old hens. They’d clucked at me, smiling at each other as they turned to face me, blocking me from walking past and into my room.

“I take it you had a fun night?” Georgia had grinned, her blue eyes so like her brother’s, Ethan, shining against the gold flaked marble column she was leaning against. “Is Lena awake yet? Breakfast is being served downstairs—waffles, her favorite.” Her tone had been teasing and playful, not a single hint of malice, but I’d narrowed my eyes at her nonetheless.

“She’s sleeping in,” I’d said with the most genuine smile I could muster. My head was pounding and I desperately needed a cup of coffee before delving into conversation with her family, especially these two. I’d already been stuck in a conversation with Georgia and Vicky during my first night at the palace,

and an hour later I had still been stuck until George, her grandson and namesake, came to my aid with some made up emergency.

I'd nodded at them both and slipped between them before Georgia could say another word, but as I'd opened my door and stepped inside my room, I'd heard Vicky quip, "I cannot wait for their wedding."

Well, I couldn't be upset. Neither could Lena. Her family was obviously aware there was something more than friendship between us, and our not-so-private jaunt through the palace as we made our way to her bedroom likely solidified it as being much, much more.

I'd sighed, undressing quickly and tossing my dress shirt and pants on the floor, realizing with a curse beneath my breath that I'd left my suit jacket on the beach.

A button-up shirt and trousers had seemed appropriate enough for what I was planning on doing this morning, so I'd gotten dressed and came downstairs for breakfast.

Rowan Gray, the Alpha King of Valoria, blinked at me several times as I sat across from him at a cozy mosaic-tiled bistro table on the private terrace outside of the dining room. Inside, at least a dozen extended family members were milling about, drinking coffee and eating a late breakfast. A group of children sat on the other side of the terrace playing some board game, and their presence was likely the only reason Rowan hadn't reached out to strangle me.

I pushed the velvet drawstring bag he'd been ignoring for the last two minutes toward him, resisting the urge to chuck it into his lap. He sucked on his lower lip for a moment, then exhaled, nostrils flaring.

"You had no right to mark her. She's not of age to know her mate."

"She was under the impression that she wouldn't be able to feel the mate bond because of what she is. I feel the bond—"

"Because you imprinted and marked her," he interrupted.

I swallowed, flexing my jaw. "No, because I felt the mate bond for her, and I acted on it with her permission. She marked me first."

"I don't believe that—"

"Ask her," I pressed, knowing I was playing with fire.

Rowan, compared to everyone else in his family, seemed to be the only level-headed Gray in the three or four generations I'd met so far. Even his Luna, Hanna, was sensitive and stoic. But I could see the fury blazing in Rowan's eyes, which had not yet glanced down at the velvet bag. I was growing impatient and pushed the bag a fraction of an inch toward him again.

His hand clamped down on my wrist, fixing it in place against the tiles.

"No," he said in a firm hiss, low enough that the children playing on the other side of the terrace couldn't hear him.

"Uh, yes," I retorted, and his grip on my wrist tightened.

My powers were not as strong as the powers possessed by some of the White Queens. I could will all of the darkness and shadows I wanted and if they countered them, they would have little effect. So I was stuck with my arm pinned, looking into Lena's father's eyes while he told me there was no way in hell that I was marrying his daughter.

"Why?" I asked sweetly, mockingly, which was a really stupid thing to do. He was going to be my father-in-law, after all, regardless of how he felt about it.

"Why?" he repeated. "Because—"

"Because she's the Moon Goddess, and no one is worthy of her hand? Or because she's needed in Winter Forest immediately? Speaking of which, it wasn't very cool that no one told her about Luna Maeve's plans—"

"That is enough," he growled, his eyes narrowing into slits.

"She was very upset about it last night," I continued, ignoring the way his fingernails were biting into my skin. "I did everything I could to calm her down, you know—"

The noise he made, low in his throat, sent a chill up my spine. I could see the faint glow around his irises, and felt his nails sharpen into claws, drawing blood. Shift, I thought. Let's do this right here, right now, in front of your whole damn family.

"Oh, there you are. Good morning, Alpha King Alexander," came a honeyed voice in the doorway to the terrace.

Rowan let go of me and removed his hand from the table, clearing his throat as Luna Queen Hanna of Valoria set a plate of fruit and a cup of coffee on the table, taking a seat between us.

"You can call me Xander," I smiled, removing my arm from the table.

Blood was seeping through the sleeve of my shirt, which was now torn from where Rowan's nails had pierced the fabric. She smiled back at me, a genuine smile, warm and welcoming. I glanced at Rowan, raising my brow at him in a mocking fashion. He glared.

"What's this?" she asked her husband, reaching for the velvet bag, but Rowan snatched it from her before she could grasp it.

"Nothing—"

"It's a ring that belonged to my mother," I said softly, forcing my face into the warmest yet most forlorn expression I could possibly achieve.

"A ring?" Hanna said, her eyes focusing on mine. Her cheeks colored, and an excited smile twitched against her lips. Rowan was practically steaming with fury.

"I'd like to give it to Lena."

"To Lena?" Hanna repeated, looking a little shocked.

"I want to ask her to marry me. I was just asking for her father's blessing—" I set my eyes on Rowan.

He swallowed, his jaw set. I could see him grinding his teeth as he clutched the bag in his fist for dear life.

“Oh, Rowan, this is wonderful!”

“Isn’t it?” Rowan ground out, holding my gaze with furious intensity.

“May I see the ring?” she asked, and I nodded, but Rowan made no move to let go of the bag and hand it to her.

She gave him a quizzical look as she pried his fingers loose and took the bag from him. “Goddess, Rowan, are you all right? You look like you’re having a stroke—”

“I believe I just might be,” he said under his breath. “Excuse me.”

He slid his chair back and stood abruptly. He looked down at me like he wanted nothing more than to grab me by the collar and toss me over the side of the terrace, but then thought better of it, looking down at his wife.

“I’m going to take a walk.”

Before she could reply, her face twisted in concern, he was gone.

“He told me no,” I said, leaning back in my chair.

She blinked at me, then shrugged, opening the little bag and fishing for the ring at the bottom.

“It’s not our decision to make,” she said with a kind smile. “It’s Lena’s. Rowan comes from an old-fashioned family, you know. Times are different now.”

“Old-fashioned as in arranged marriages and breeders?” I said with a little laugh.

She gave me a knowing smile in return. “He was supposed to marry my sister. Did you know that? But it turned out he was my mate.” She pulled the ring from the bag and sucked in her breath, her brow furrowing as she held it by the band, letting the sun catch on the smoky, charcoal-colored diamond at the center that was flanked by sapphires of the deepest blue. It was set in platinum with flakes of sapphire, obsidian, and smoky diamonds through the band.

She was speechless, and I’d expected that. Compared to the bright, colorful jewelry favored by the women in the family, this ring was pure night, pure shadow and darkness. Hanna herself wore a band of jade around her ring finger.

She looked thoughtful, almost melancholy as she turned the ring in the sun, watching the colors dance within the main diamond. I figured she’d hate it. It wasn’t a beautiful ring by the standards of this realm. It was gothic and dated.

I was the King of the Dark Realm after all.

“You know, don’t you?” she said softly, her eyes misting with tears. “You’ve seen her glow—”

“At night? Yes. That’s her... her best time.” I didn’t anticipate the sudden rush of emotion that hit me like a rogue wave as I watched Lena’s mother turn the ring, marveling at the way it cast speckles of color across the palm of her hand. She looked at me eventually, her eyes so deep and full of emotion.

“You love her,” she said, a statement, not a question. All I could do was nod. “But she—”

“She has to go to Winter Forest and take over the throne. Soon, from what I understand.”

Hanna licked her lower lip, nodding as she slipped the ring back into the bag.

“We didn’t know Rosalie’s intentions until two days ago. I thought she would rule for another ten years at least, and then Maeve.... But—”

“Lena knows,” I sighed, looking down at Hanna.

Hanna chewed the inside of her cheek, then broke from my gaze to look out over the water. “I didn’t want this for her,” she whispered. Her words broke my heart.

“She could rule my kingdom, with me—”

“How?” she said, not looking me in the eye. Her gaze was firmly fixed on the distant waves rolling away from the beach.

That was a question I couldn’t answer.

Silence filled the space between us, broken only by the sound of the children fighting over the board game and people talking in the dining room. I heard Maeve’s voice fill the room, her laughter booming through the area.

“You have our blessing,” Hanna said after a long moment of reflection.

I could also see the memories flickering behind her eyes. I wondered what she was thinking about, if maybe she had been thinking about her own challenges when it came to marrying her mate. She said he was meant to marry his sister. Was there more?

But then I heard Lena’s voice raised in protest, and turned to see her making her way through the crowded dining room, a plate of waffles balanced in one hand. She met my eye, arching her brow as she noticed me sitting with her mother.

I quickly tucked the velvet bag in my pocket and motioned her over.

Sold as the Alpha King’s Breeder Chapter 564

Lena

My chest squeezed as I watched Xander and my mom speaking in low tones on the terrace. I’d been trying to make my way toward them for the better part of five minutes but found myself stuck in meaningless conversations with practically everyone in the room.

He’d motioned me over, but I was stuck in place, chewing on a dry waffle I hadn’t had the chance to dress with butter or syrup because of my cousin Kat’s extensive questions about the reception.

She was the youngest daughter of my great-aunt Vicky and was heavily pregnant with her third baby. She'd fallen asleep during the wedding ceremony and hadn't felt well enough to attend the reception, but was begging everyone for any tidbits of drama or gossip they might have seen or heard.

Thankfully, Oliver and Charlie stumbled into the kitchen, both of them looking worse for wear and reeking of seaweed. Maeve cried out, pointing to the sand they dragged in behind them, and suddenly the entire room erupted in noisy exclamations as several different conversations converged into one.

I exhaled through my nose and sidestepped around a few people toward the coffee bar, pouring myself a mug while balancing my plate in my free hand. The wedding guests outside of the family, those who stayed in the guest houses and cabanas that dotted the palace grounds, would be attending a formal breakfast laid out in the ballroom.

Will and Hollis, I realized with a sigh of relief, weren't here at all. They'd most likely left for their honeymoon a few hours earlier, catching a private yacht to wherever the hell they were going.

I had just turned to head out onto the terrace when someone small tugged on the sleeve of my shirt. I looked down, seeing a sly-looking Luke peering back up at me with his steel gray eyes.

"What do you want?"

"I know something you don't know!" he teased, batting his eyelashes at me.

I narrowed my eyes at him, shifting my weight and looking down at him expectantly. "Oh? Are you going to tell me?"

"My information comes at a cost," he drawled, sticking out his lower lip. "I want to play hide and seek."

"With me? I'm too old. There are plenty of other kids around to play with."

"I don't like them," he retorted, crossing his skinny arms over his chest. "I want to play with you!"

"How about you tell me first, and then we can play—"

"No! I want to play right now!"

I set my unfinished breakfast down on the coffee bar and glared at him, flaring my nostrils as I relented to his request.

"One round, and then you tell me what you know. And it better be good."

"It's about your boyfriend," he said with a sly smile, then made little smooching sounds at me.

I ground my teeth, glancing over at Xander, who was staring right at me. "The adults need me, Luke. One round, in the back foyer. That's it."

He beamed and called out to the rest of the children, who were using the commotion Oliver and Charlie had started to scream and run between the legs of the adults without being corrected. My ears were ringing by the time Luke and I reached the foyer, which was less extravagant than the main foyer at the front entrance of the palace, but still had plenty of places to hide behind thick velvet curtains and several cabinets, tables, and plush couches near the open doors to the back garden.

Nine children belonging to a variety of my extended family members looked up at me.

“You have to be it, Lena,” one of Keaton and Myla’s youngest children said, clapping her hands excitedly.

“I don’t want to be it!” I cried, playfully sticking out my lower lip.

“But you’re the biggest, and the super oldest!” said one of my second or third cousins, a little boy with curly blonde hair.

I thought he was one of Sarah’s, Aunt Vicky’s middle child, but I wasn’t sure. There were so many little ones in that branch of the family.

“Super oldest?” I said, pretending to cry.

Several of the children squealed in delight at my expense.

“Lena and I will both be it,” came Xander’s voice. I stiffened, surprised, but then relaxed as he came up behind me. All the children looked up at him with a stroke of fear lingering behind their eyes. “You have twenty seconds, starting... now!”

No one moved, all of the kids stunned into stillness. He leaned over me, baring his teeth and growling loud enough to make me jump.

All of the kids screamed and began running around in a panic, but their initial surprise dissolved in frantic giggles as Xander took me by the shoulders and turned me around.

“You’re supposed to close your eyes,” he said, nudging me softly in the ribs.

I closed my eyes, chuckling low in my throat as the sound of childlike chatter mingled with the curtains straining under the weight of children ripping them along the rod and cabinets opening and closing.

“How many are there?” he whispered.

“Fifteen, sixteen—” I counted loudly, then grinned, shrugging my shoulders. “Nine kids, I think. Maybe more.”

“Damn, this is going to take all afternoon.”

“We can pretend to not find any of them at all and give their parents some peace for the rest of the day,” I suggested, and Xander laughed, but then a small voice burst out, “That’s more than twenty seconds!”

“You can’t even count, Amanda!” someone replied, and Xander and I both sputtered with laughter as we called out, “Twenty!” and turned around.

“Luke is the one I want,” I whispered before we broke apart and began following the giggles throughout the room. It wasn’t hard to find the kids. They were all really, really bad at hide-n-seek.

But after ten minutes, none of us could find Luke.

“Where is he?” Xander demanded, dangling a piece of chocolate in a gold wrapper he’d found in his pocket in front of the eight children looking up at us.

“Luke is a cheater. He hid outside!”

Xander tossed the chocolate to the little boy who’d snitched on Luke, and the rest of the kids whined for candy, to which Xander directed them to a bowl along the hallway leading to the foyer.

“Everyone is going to turn on you for telling the kids where the candy is,” I teased as we watched them run toward the bowl in question.

“They can’t reach it—” but Xander was silenced as one of the boys got on his hands and knees while Keaton and Myla’s youngest daughter used him as a stool. She grabbed the entire bowl off the high- wall table and dumped the contents onto the floor.

“Oh, Goddess, we gotta get out of here,” Xander said, looking a little pale.

“Let’s find Luke,” I said, taking him by the hand and leading him out of the foyer.

Luke was the family spy, and his skills in the art were practiced and polished to a fine edge. We spent nearly half an hour combing the garden for him without a hint of his whereabouts.

“Do you think he’s even out here?” I hissed, growing impatient.

Xander sniffed dramatically, then screwed up his face in a scowl. “I can smell him!” he sounded loudly, and a bush rustled about ten feet away from us, a little giggle filtering through the foliage. Xander arched his brow at me, then pounced into the bush. A scuffle ensued, and after two entire minutes, Xander rose from the bush, sticks and leaves sticking in his hair while holding Luke up by the collar of his shirt. Luke’s feet were dangling in the air as Xander stepped out of the bush, dusting himself off before lowering Luke to the ground.

“You guys suck at this game,” he laughed, shaking himself off like a wet dog before turning to skip into the house.

“Not so fast!” I snapped.

Luke looked over his shoulder at me, a boyish gleam in his eyes. “Fair is fair,” he snickered, then turned around with a finger outstretching and pointing at Xander. “He has something in his pocket.”

“I have lots of things in my pockets,” Xander said with a shrug. “That’s not really a secret.”

“You have something for Lena in your pocket!”

Xander ran his tongue along the inside of his lower lip, watching Luke with a sudden gleam of marked disapproval behind his eyes. He c****d his head, a silent challenge.

“I’m going to say what it is!”

“No, you’re not—” Xander said sternly, but Luke stuck his tongue out at him.

“Luke, stop—”

“It’s a little bag with a ring in it! A big, ugly ring!”

“What?” I asked, but Xander scoffed, his cheeks reddening.

“It’s not ugly, you little monster. Get out of here before I toss you over the railing!”

Luke rolled his eyes and started to skip away, but he looked over his shoulder again at Xander, eyes narrowed.

“My brothers have dangled me over the railing dozens of times. I’m not scared of you!”

Xander’s eyes blazed a fiery amber, his teeth bared. I swear I saw a shadow of darkness envelop him, something I’d never seen before. I was thrown off by it, a chill of unease rippling over my skin as I took a single step away from him, and towards Luke.

Luke looked him up and down, then rolled his eyes once more before walking away, whistling.

Xander calmed, his eyes losing their glow. He looked at me, blinking a few times before the tension left his shoulders.

“What the hell was that?” I exclaimed, but Xander only shrugged and dusted a few rogue leaves from his shirt.

“That kid is a problem,” he said sternly, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I’ve never seen you do that.”

“Do what?”

“The, uh, whatever you just did.”

He pursed his lips, his eyes leaving mine to glance back at the palace once more before he turned and looked at me fully.

“I have powers like you, but I don’t use them often. I can suck the joy right out of someone if I wanted to.”

“You’re joking—”

“Not at all. I can overwhelm most people with my powers. Some members of your family are the exception.”

“What do you mean?”

“White Queen blood.”

I stared at him. I wasn’t sure if he was joking or not.

“I did say I’d tell you everything, I figured that was a good place to start, given the situation. I couldn’t have hurt the kid much, and obviously I would never. But I could scare him a bit if I wanted to. He’s immune in a few different ways, it seems.”

“He has three older brothers,” I said, my voice wavering. I was shocked, but not totally surprised. I’d caught glimpses of his powers but thought it was some illusion, some trick of my own mind.

“I do have a ring in my pocket,” he said suddenly.

I opened my mouth to speak, but the words didn't appear on the tip of my mouth before he could continue.

"Follow me."

He turned on his heel and began walking toward the stairs that led down to the beach.

"What the hell?" I whispered, and followed.

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 565

Lena

A ring? There was only one reason Xander would have a ring in his pocket. The air in my lungs felt heavy, and I found it impossible to swallow as I followed him down the stairs and onto the private beach.

The midday sun was bright and warm, and a prickle of sweat formed on my brow as I followed him down the stairs. He dressed smartly in a button-down shirt and trousers, and I was grossly underdressed in a silken shirt and flowing capri pants of the same material. My feet were bare on the sand, which was as soft as powdered sugar.

Xander kept walking, and it was difficult to match his long, quick stride. I walked briskly to keep up with him, occasionally reaching out to grab his arm in an attempt to slow him down.

"Xander!"

But he didn't turn around until we'd reached the far end of the beach, where the sea cliffs towered high above our heads and the waves were violent against the columns of black rock that lined this particular corner of the protected cove.

"Xander!" I cried, grabbing his sleeve. The fabric on the cuff of his sleeves was torn, and drops of dried blood stained the pale blue fabric.

"I do have a ring." His voice was heated, and he was panting slightly from the excursion of walking nearly a quarter mile through the sand. A wave broke against the cliff nearby, the sound of the impact drowning out any response I may have had. He stuffed his hands in his pockets when he noticed my eyes had locked on the tears on his sleeve. "It's for you, but your father—he... doesn't approve."

"You asked him—"

"I asked him if I could ask for your hand in marriage, yes. And he said no."

"I—"

"Your mother gave us her blessing, however. If it's what you want."

I gaped at him, trying to form a rational response to what he'd just said.

"I'm going to Winter Forest," I blurted, my words hushed by the waves.

The sky darkened around us as clouds rolled in and covered the sun, sucking the warmth from the beach in an instant.

"You could come with me—"

"You know I can't do that, Xander."

"Your aunt can take her rightful place, Lena. This wasn't supposed to be your burden, not yet anyway. I could see it in your mother's eyes—"

"What do you want from me? What can I possibly give you, Xander? Be your wife, your Luna? I'd be in the same position I am now, just in a different place!"

"I want you by my side, forever—always. I don't want to have to wonder what could have been. I want to wake up every damn day next to you and fall asleep with you in my arms. I'd give up my kingdom for you, Lena. I'm willing to do so now."

"You cannot," I cried, but he shook his head slowly, side to side.

The wind was picking up, and his hair was ruffled and wild in the stiff, salty breeze. His eyes were shining like polished obsidian, the amber flakes gleaming as though they were being held near a fire, the flames a mere reflection of the embers in the darkness of his gem-like eyes.

He was serious, though. I could feel it. He was as serious as he had been the night he marked me.

"I told you everything would be okay, and it will be if we're together. I want to marry you. I'm asking you to marry me. Be my wife."

"I can't," I stammered, my skin going cold as ice at the words. "I can't—"

"Because you don't want to, or you believe your life is out of your hands—"

"It is out of my hands! I'm the living, breathing fruition of a prophecy, Xander. The Moon Goddess... you said so yourself—"

"I don't care who or what you are!" He took a few steps toward me until we were only a foot apart. "I don't understand why you care so f*****g much, Lena, for Goddess's sake."

"You don't understand the amount of pressure I've had on me since I was born, Xander. You have no idea how this feels!"

"Of course, I can't. I'm just saying—"

"I'm saying," I snapped, "that I can hurt people because of who I am. I have hurt people. I don't want to be this—this thing, okay? I want to be normal. I want to have a normal life. I want to just be Lena, not Selene, not the princess who connects the kingdoms of the east and west. Not the White Queen. And I sure as hell don't want to be the Moon Goddess."

"You haven't hurt anyone—"

"I killed Slate—"

"I saw him after that happened," he growled, beginning to lose his patience. "He was waiting for a train, Lena. He was fine. You probably just... stunned him. He just left you there and ran off."

"I almost killed my mother," I said as softly as I could, my voice catching on the words.

I'd mentioned it to him before, what felt like ages ago now, but I'd never fully explained. He would never truly understand unless I told him the truth. I looked up at him through my lashes. A storm was brewing around us. Shadows moved across his face, highlighting the curve of his jaw, his straight nose, and his high cheekbones. Everything about him was dark and brooding. The shadow he cast, that strange, unholy power of night that I hadn't even noticed until we were bound together by the mate bond, seemed to creep toward me, sheltering me in its embrace.

He was waiting for me to speak. He was waiting for me to tell him, finally, the whole version of my truth.

"My parents had to leave abruptly for Avondale in the middle of the night when I was ten. They came home a week later, and that night they told me... they told me everything. They told me about what they'd been through when they were our age, and what my grandparents had been through. They told me about the prophecy of the moonstones, and how I'd been born...." I crossed my hands over my chest, hugging myself against the sudden chill wafting over my skin.

"My aunt Maeve was having her fourth child, and they found out it was a boy. She... my mom said Maeve went into a panic, a full tailspin, which was unlike her. I guess Maeve had been told she'd have four boys, and having that come to pass..."

"It made everything seem more real, everything your parents and aunt and uncle went through?"

"Yes," I answered, a wave of relief washing over me. "Yes, it did. But then everyone turned their attention to me. I didn't really understand why at that age. I was a kid. I could do things, though. I had my powers back then but not like I do now. I could make flowers grow just by thinking about them. I could send sparks of light across the room. But up until the night my parents told me the truth, I thought everyone was like that. And that knowledge that I was different, and the way they began to coddle me, hide me away..."

I looked into his eyes, a sudden rush of long-buried spite rushing to the surface of my subconscious.

"They didn't know how to help me. No one knew. Not the Church, not the Temple of the White Queens, not the survivors of Dianny who remembered the ways of their people before their home was destroyed.

"I love my parents," I said, my voice laced with conviction. "And everything they did, they did out of love. I know that. But when I was a teenager I just—I hated them. I especially hated my mom. I hated her because I needed someone to take my frustration out on, and she was the only person who truly understood what I was going through, because she had been through something similar."

"Your mom also has powers?"

"She's a Dream Dancer," I answered.

To my surprise, he didn't question what that was. He just nodded his head. His eyes were on mine, but his gaze was distant, lost in some long forgotten memory.

"What happened, exactly?" he asked, and I swallowed back the fear that was holding me back from continuing.

He wouldn't see me the same way after this. He couldn't.

“They were going to send me away for a while, to live in Winter Forest. I was fourteen. I’d gotten in trouble at school the year before, and they had been homeschooling me at Castle Drogomor. I was rebelling everyday, and I just snapped when they told me they thought I needed to spend some time in Winter Forest. It was an explosive fight. I was so angry, irrationally angry. When Mom came to check on me I just... I just...”

I’d lost control. I remember screaming. I remember her backing out of the room with her hands outstretched, tears staining her face. She told me she loved me, and that I needed to let her help me. Then, there was a bright light, and then... nothing.

“She didn’t wake up for two weeks,” I concluded. “I stayed in my room for the entirety of that time. The night that it happened, vines covered every inch of my room to the point that it was impossible to open the door any longer. I couldn’t stop it.”

“No wonder you became a botanist,” he tried to joke, but the smile that twitched in the corner of his mouth fell flat.

“I promised myself I’d never do that to anyone else. That I’d never use my powers again. I couldn’t. Since Mom woke up, she has never once mentioned what happened. It’s like she doesn’t remember. Dad doesn’t talk about it. They didn’t send me to Winter Forest. I graduated from high school a year early and convinced them to send me to Morhan the second I got the acceptance letter in the mail.”

“And now they want you to go back—”

“I’ll be twenty-one in a few months,” I breathed.

“You’ll come into your full powers?”

“Yes, if I haven’t already. They’ve only gotten stronger. That’s why we can’t—I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You can’t hurt me, Lena—”

“But I could. I could hurt our children, Xander. People you love; people we love. I’m better off alone, somewhere far, far away. The worst part of this is that I want those things, Xander. I want you. I want children... our children. I want a life. I want it with you but—”

Xander’s face took on an odd expression at my words. He looked pained, practically guilty. I tilted my head, opening my mouth to speak, but he met my eye again.

All I saw was heartbreak.

“I should have told you this so long ago,” he said, closing the distance between us in a single step. He gripped my upper arms as though he were hanging onto me for dear life.

“What?”

“When you were sick, during your fever after you were attacked by Jen... Alma was concerned. She told me... she told me it was unlikely that you’d... that—” He stumbled over his words as his grip grew so tight I winced, and nearly flinched away.

“Alma? What are you talking about?”

He met my eye, his own eyes hollow and empty.

“You can’t have children anymore, Lena. That injury was extensive...”

I didn’t hear the rest of his explanation. I felt like I was being pulled backward into the darkness of the storm bearing down on us. The clouds closed in on me, swallowing me whole, as what was left of my patched-up, exhausted heart shattered in my chest.

“You didn’t tell me?” I said, shaking with the heaviest emotion I’d ever experienced.

“I should have.”

“But you didn’t. You haven’t been honest with me at all. Not once.”

“Lena—”

“No!” I tore myself from his grip and staggered away from him, swatting his hand when he reached for me again. “Get away from me.”

“Look at me, Lena!”

I reached up, covering my ears with my hands. I was in a panic, my body going haywire as the world around me began to spin out of control.

“What else are you hiding from me?” I cried, not looking at him.

He didn’t answer. Only the sound of the violent surf filled my ears. Pressure, that’s all I felt—like the world was caving in on me. No children? I couldn’t have children? Xander kept that from me for this long?

I closed my eyes, trying desperately to get control of myself, but it was no use. Every pain I’d encountered over the past several months came barreling forward, paralyzing me. I screamed, falling to my knees.

Then, nothing. There was not a single sound for several long, agonizing seconds.

I opened my eyes, and found myself alone, pelted by heavy drops of rain.

Sold as the Alpha King’s Breeder Chapter 566

Xander

I reached back and felt along the back of my head, looking for a bump or some sort of wound large enough to knock me out.

That was the only explanation for this. I was not on the beach anymore; that was certain. Thick trees dotted with waxy white blooms rustled over my head, and the ground beneath was soft, grassy, not the powdered sugar sand of the stormy beach I’d been standing on only a moment before.

Maybe it had been more than a moment. It had to be. Someone had knocked me out and shipped me off, dumping me here, wherever this was. Likely Lena’s father, I thought with a bitter taste in my mouth.

I reached down and felt along my body, finding everything intact, including the velvet bag in the front pocket of my trousers.

“What the f**k?” I groaned, sitting upright and running my hands over my face and through my hair. Sand dusted my shoulders, coming loose from my jet-black strands of hair that were now long enough to curl around my ears and the corner of my jaw.

“Lena?” I bellowed, but the only answer was the rustling of a soft breeze through the unfamiliar trees.

I stood, but then lost my balance and nearly fell back onto my knees. I braced myself on a tree, pressing my full weight against it, which caused it to rattle and spill a cascade of fragrant blooms the size of my fist all over my body. Magnolia? That’s what it smelled like. I plucked one of the petals from my shoulders and pitched it between my fingers.

“Hello?” I called out.

Nothing—no sound, no answer. I tried to mind-link with someone—anyone—but there was nothing but radio silence. Even Adrien, with whom I shared the strongest bond, was absent.

I sighed, nodding my head as I looked around beneath my lashes.

Those bastards had definitely dumped me somewhere. I’d likely been out for days.

I began to walk through what happened to be a thick forest. Trees of every shape and size covered the landscape, and the forest floor was unusually bare with nothing but perfect, emerald turf that felt more like walking on carpet than grass. No roots stuck out of the ground to trip on, and no leaves scattered the ground. It was beautiful—but too beautiful. The day after the wedding was the day before Winter Solstice, and somewhere with trees like this? Their branches should have been bare, and the forest floor should have been coated in decaying leaves.

“I haven’t been out for that long,” I reassured myself—at least I tried. Unease washed over me as I continued forward with no clear direction. It was light out, possibly morning given the pinkish-violet color of the sky. It was warm, the perfect temperature.

“What the f**k is going on?” I growled, then stood as still as possible, holding my breath as I scanned my surroundings for any signs of life.

No birds. No small game rustling the patches of bushes dappled with pink and yellow buds—not a sound, save for a soft wind that seemed to only touch the canopy above my head.

“You must be in trouble,” came a voice from behind me.

I turned, crouching in a defensive position as the voice faded, and a strange chuckling sound filtered through the trees all around me.

I waited, my blood rushing through my body as adrenaline prickled over my skin. I had no weapons. I could only shift. But the second I closed my eyes and let my wolf begin to take over, the voice, both near and far away, spoke again.

“You can’t do that here,” it said from wherever it was coming from, its voice both feminine and masculine as if two people were talking at the same time. I straightened my back and opened my eyes, looking around slowly to take every inch of my surroundings into account.

“Show yourself!”

“I am!” it replied, and a stiff breeze rustled the trees, bushes, and flowers around me, but didn’t touch my clothes, or hair.

I froze.

I’d heard stories of haunted woods, demons, and spirits. I’d heard tales of old, from the time before the Moon Goddess walked the mortal realms, when the forgotten gods and their spirit-like familiars tormented those who wandered into the pockets where the spirit realm was open to the realms of the mortals.

But that was fantasy. I was dreaming, right? I was, most definitely, severely concussed.

“You’re not injured,” the voice laughed, a girlish laugh, as though it came from a child. “She put you here.”

“Who?”

“The Builder, of course. Who else could do it?”

“Who are you?”

“Oh, I am nothing.”

“What?”

“I said, I am nothing—”

“I heard you!” I spun in a circle trying to chase the voice, but it was all around me. “Show yourself!”

A breeze rushed past me, then the entire area stilled. I looked up as little sparks of light cascaded through the canopy of foliage, floating down around me in perfectly circular orbs of white.

I was dreaming. That’s what this was.

“You’re not dreaming,” the voice whispered, followed by a snicker of mirth that danced through the trees above my head. I glared up at the trees.

“You’re reading my mind?”

“Why did she send you here? What purpose do you serve?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I replied, pinching the skin on my forearm to try to wake myself up. But I felt the pain of it. I smacked myself several times, hard enough for the impact to sting. The voice laughed again.

“You must be the man.”

“Who?”

“The man,” it repeated.

I furrowed my brow, scowling up at the bright orbs as they danced around the tree branches above my head.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about—”

“Follow me,” it said, and I watched as the orbs began to flutter away, creating a trail of light through the canopy.

I turned and watched them fly away.

Lena

Abigail turned around the small sitting room on the third floor of the palace, running her fingers over the windowsill as she passed it by. She sighed, tucking a lock of her red hair behind her ear as she turned to face me with her arms crossed over her chest.

“Do you think he might have just... left?”

“Of course he did,” I replied, picking at the decorative pillow I was holding in my lap. Little blue seahorses fanned out over the pillow, tiny blue beads sparkling in the gray light coming through the windows. It was raining hard, and Abigail had been helping clear the flower arrangements out of the ballroom when she saw me cross the foyer.

I’d spent the better part of two hours telling her everything, and I mean everything—about me, about Xander, about Crimson Creek.

“Your parents gave him their blessing—”

“My dad didn’t. He said no. But I...” I didn’t have the words to explain how I felt. I was just as angry as I was heartbroken. He’d lied to me in the worst way. He’d hidden something from me that wasn’t his right to keep from me.

I couldn’t have children.

How could he do this to me?

“f**k him,” Abigail sneered, pulling a random book off a shelf and turning it over in her hands. “You need to get out of here for a while, Lena. Take some time to yourself.”

“I can’t. They’re sending me to Winter Forest—”

“You’re a grown woman. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do.”

“It’s not that simple—”

“But it is! You’re not a child! You could get on a plane right now and go anywhere you want. You have your own money, right?”

“I guess—”

“Then let’s go to the airport! Where do you want to go?”

“I have nowhere to go, Abi. I have no connections, no job. I can’t go back to Morhan. My family will come looking for me there.”

Abigail clicked her tongue, shrugging one shoulder as she dug into the center pocket of the apron she was wearing. She pulled out a piece of paper and tossed it to me. I unfolded it, read it, then looked up at her with arched brows.

“What is this?”

“A job, if you want it. It’s not going to pay much at all, but it comes with room and board. It’s also about as far away as you can get—”

“Where?” I said, rising to my feet.

She gave me a sideways smile, a gleam of mischief in her eyes. “A place called Cedar Hollow. It’s about seventy miles west of Red Lakes, over the mountains. It’s a cute place, from what I’ve been told. Lots of those big trees you like—”

“When? When can I go?”

“Now, if you want. Just call the number—”

I was gone from the room in an instant, leaving Abigail gaping behind me as the door swung shut, and I padded down the hallway toward my room.

Winter Solstice was tomorrow. Everyone would be busy at the parade and market in downtown Avondale. I could sneak away from the festivities and catch the next flight west to Breles, and take the train north to Moon Haven, or even Red Lakes. My mind was spinning as I hastily packed my duffle bag with anything I could get my hands on.

A job—I’d have a job. I’d be so far away no one could find me.

But Xander drifted back into my mind. I braced myself with my hands on either side of the dufflebag, pushing my palms into the mattress as I stifled a sob.

Be done with these games, I told myself. He was never going to tell you the truth. He was never going to tell you about Crimson Creek. He was toying with you, stringing you along....

The mark on my chest didn’t twinge or burn at the thought of him. He was gone... really, truly gone.

I zipped up my dufflebag and looked around the room.

I walked to the vanity and fished through the drawers for a pen and piece of paper. I poured my heart out onto the page, staining it with tears.

“I’m sorry,” I wrote, over and over again. “I love you. And I’m sorry.”

I folded the paper and wrote my parent’s names on the top.

This time tomorrow, I’d be gone. I’d be on my way to a new life.

A life without powers. A life without rank. A life without the crushing expectations of my birthright, or the prophecy that pressed down like weights on my shoulders.

A life without Xander.

I wiped my tears and put on my best smile, then turned to the door.

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 567

Lena

One Week Later

Olive Thermaldi was a strange woman.

She was tapping her pen against her desk as she looked me up and down, and then peered down at my transcript from Morhan, a look of suspicion etched into every line of her face. She was slight of build and rather tall, with soft gray hair that was pinned away from her and twisted into a low, neat bun at the nape of her neck. Her dark, rich skin was nearly perfect, and despite her age, she had an air of youth that I found hard not to notice as she ran her tongue along her lower lip and shrugged, handing the transcript back to me.

She'd been reading my transcript line by line for the past hour. Thankfully, it had my alias instead of my given name. There was no way I could be traced here by my family, I'd made sure of it during my long, somewhat arduous journey across the entirety of the western continent.

Cedar Hollow was a small, mountainous town as far west as possible. The great Western Range towered overhead, cutting the town off to even the closest settlements. There was a single road in and out, and it had taken me seven hours by a rickety bus to even reach the town.

"You're overqualified," Olive said, sucking in her cheeks and arching her brows. "Can't find a job that better suits your skills, huh?"

"I wanted to come here." I lied but was acting as enthusiastically as possible.

"Well, you're an hour late and a dollar short, my dear. This position has already been filled. The Alpha only has the need for one horticulturist at the moment—"

"But—"

"But," she interrupted, looking me up and down. "Do you like kids?"

"Kids? I—"

"Ever thought about teaching?"

"Teaching? I never—I don't have a teaching license—"

She waved a hand in dismissal, chuckling a bit as she tapped her pen on her desk again.

"You think the Alpha King and his administration care about schools this rural? Our kids are born in Cedar Hollow and stay in Cedar Hollow, you know."

"I don't think I'm qualified—"

"You're more than qualified. A degree in the sciences is more than any of our teachers have ever had. We need someone soon, anyway. The Solstice break is over next week and their teacher decided not to come back to work after maternity leave."

"I've never taught before!" I stammered.

Olive gave me a look, then laughed, turning her chair to reach into a cabinet beneath her desk. She pulled out a folder and set it on the desk, shaking her head.

"Can you use scissors?"

"Yes, I—"

"What about a glue stick?"

"Yes..."

"Do you know shapes and colors?"

"Of course? What—"

"Then you know everything you need to know to teach kindergarten, Ms, uh, what was it again?"

"Ms. Grayleigh," I said, clearing my throat. Ms. Grayleigh. Lena Grayleigh. That's who I was now, and would be forever. Selene Gray was gone, as was her long, white hair that brushed her hips when she walked. I'd cut it off in a train station bathroom three days ago, tossing the length of it in the trash. I reached up and tucked a lock of my chin-length hair behind my ear as Olive looked me up and down again.

"Well, Ms. G," she said with a smile as she pushed a contract in front of me. "You look like someone who may or may not be running from something, or just wanting to start fresh, where no one knows your name. Right?"

I blinked, fighting the color that was spreading over my neck and cheeks.

"It's none of my business, anyway. But you can have a job and a place to live. All you've gotta do is sign."

Teach kindergarten? Me?

I looked down at the contract, my fingers curling around the pen sitting next to the folder.

I kind of had to do it. I couldn't just go back home, not now, not after stealing away from my family with little more than a note telling them not to look for me.

I'd be paid, not well, but enough to buy what I needed to survive. The job came with a cottage and a stipend at the weekly market for meat and dairy. I sighed, glancing up at Olive before looking down at the contract.

"The kids will love ya, someone young and energetic. Their last teacher was a bit of a bore, and the teacher before that was a logger who lost an arm in an accident involving a chainsaw."

I looked up at her, shocked.

She giggled. "It was as gory as it sounds."

"Oh, um..." I tried to smile but found myself bursting with adrenaline as I positioned the pen above the signature.

"The cottage is a two bedroom, one bath. Loft style, big loft—" she rattled off the attributes of the cottage, each more charming than the last—clawfoot soaker tub, porcelain basin sink, a wood-fired oven... so on, and so forth.

The pen hovered over the contract, ink dripping onto the paper near the signature line. I sighed and signed my name.

If I could survive whatever the hell was happening in Crimson Creek, I could survive a group of five-year-olds, right?

"It's not much," said the groundskeeper as he unlocked the front door of the cottage and tossed me the keys.

I almost didn't catch them because I was looking up at the incredible network of tangled redwood branches above my head. The trees here were massive, just like the trees in Red Lakes. The

landscape was uneven and rocky, and I could tell just by looking around that this place saw more rain than snow, and was likely subject to incredible bouts of thick, spooky fog.

I loved the rain. I loved the coziness of fog and mist as it whispered against the windows while a fire crackled in the background. It reminded me of home, of Mirage, a place that rarely ever saw snow and bitter cold.

And the cottage... oh, the cottage. It was absolute perfection.

I gasped as I walked inside, looking up at the exposed beams running across the shallow ceiling. The groundskeeper was a tall man, and he had to duck his head as he moved around the open kitchen and living room area. The hearth took up an entire wall, built of the same gray and brown stone as the outside of the house. The inner walls surrounding the staircase were made of wood and had been painted a pale blue and decorated with painted flowers and vines that swirled up the railing. The kitchen cabinets were a muted green, faded with age and use. There was indeed a wood-fired oven, and the groundskeeper showed me how to use it as we moved from space to space in the cottage.

Lace curtains shut out the outside world. Rain pelted on the thatch roof. The groundskeeper lit a fire in the hearth and then brought in my bags, tipping his wool hat to me in farewell.

Home... this was home. This was my home, and would likely be my home for a long time.

I ran my fingertips over every shelf in the built-in bookcases by the hearth, imagining the books I'd stack there. I would cut fresh flowers in the spring and put them in vases, covering every surface in pale, fragrant blooms.

There was a wild, unkempt garden out front, and I would tend to that too. I could just imagine hanging the herbs from the rafters and filling the entire place with the scent of rosemary and thyme.

But then I ran my fingers over the breakfast nook, the wood cool to the touch. The vision of Xander and me sitting around the table with our children rushed into my mind, and my vision blurred with tears as I tucked my hands in the pockets of my jacket.

I would never have that life, not with anyone. Xander had left, and there was no word from him at all. I'd even stopped in Morhan to gather the boxes I had packed that Heather and Viv meant to ship to Valoria but hadn't. It had been a blessing in disguise, because the boxes of my knick-knacks and books from my time on campus now sat in the center of the main room of the cottage, waiting to be unpacked.

This was what I'd always wanted, right, to be alone... to be living the life I wanted, on my own terms?

Alone... with no one to hurt, no one I could harm inadvertently with my powers.

I grabbed my duffle bag and went upstairs into the closed-off loft, lingering in the tight hallway between the two bedrooms and bathroom.

The walls were bare, and for a heartbreaking moment, I envisioned children's artwork hanging from the walls. I forced the thought away.

It had been early evening when the groundskeeper took me to my cottage, and after a long bath and an hour's worth of unpacking, I was rather hungry. The groundskeeper said there was a diner in the village that was open late for those who worked in the forest and in the mines, and that it was a short walk from the cottage. I dressed, pulling my hair into a ponytail, and I had begun to pull on my coat when a knock sounded on the door.

I froze. Had my family found me this quickly? Abigail was the only person who knew where I was. Had she told Oliver?

Or was it Xander, lured here by the mate bond we still shared?

I flew to the door and looked through the peephole.

A tall, dark-haired man was standing on the porch, his back to the door. My heart leaped in my chest as I closed the peephole and took a step away from the door.

It was Xander. I was sure it was. He was standing on my porch, right now, ready to disrupt my life yet again.

The worst part about it was that I was excited. I was glad he was here. The last week had been a heartbreak I couldn't possibly put into words. I'd let him in. I'd fight with him. Then I'd let him into my bed.

I clasped the handle but hesitated when it came to turning the knob. Another soft knock, then I heard footsteps on the porch and down the single step leading to the gravel walkway through the front garden.

"Wait!" I called out as I swung open the door.

The figure stopped walking and turned around.

“Oh,” I said beneath my breath, and I felt my heart shatter all over again.

Sold as the Alpha King’s Breeder Chapter 568

Lena

“I’m sorry,” said the man, his wide mouth curving into a friendly smile. “I heard the village got a new teacher today. I was curious. It was rude of me to intrude.”

I gripped the door handle, trying to calm the rapid beating of my heart and the gut-wrenching disappointment rippling through my veins. The man could’ve been Xander; he looked like him from behind at least. He was very tall with dark curly hair, but his face was unlike Xander’s in every way. He had bright blue eyes that sparkled in the light of the porch lamp. They probably changed color depending on what he was wearing, at least I thought so. He was handsome but boyish, with pale freckles dotting the bridge of his sharp nose. He couldn’t have been much older than me, maybe even younger.

There wasn’t a shadow of darkness around him, either. He was just... happy–happy, with a kind, welcoming face.

I smiled at him.

“Word travels fast,” I replied, clearing my throat as I let go of the doorknob and stepped out onto the porch.

“Yeah, it really does. In this town, at least. My name is... uh, Hale.”

“Lena.” I smiled, which was met by a brilliant smile in reply. A beautiful smile, I realized, as my stomach did a little flip, followed by a wave of guilt. I tried to hide the flush that drained the color from my cheeks as I tried in vain to push the thought of Xander from my mind.

“I’m sorry again, for disturbing you. I don’t know what I was thinking—”

“It’s fine, really. I was just heading out. The groundskeeper said there was a diner nearby.”

“Oh, Granny’s Diner? Yeah, it’s not far. I can walk you there if you want.” A blush colored his cheeks, and some of the tension left my shoulders. “But it’s okay, if not. It’s easy to find, actually. It’s the only thing that’s open this late.”

“Sure, we can walk together. I didn’t really have a chance to explore today.”

It was true. I’d been led out of the small office connected to the bus station straight to the cottage, and that had been that. I hadn’t even seen the village yet. The only other building I’d seen during the walk from the station to my cottage was a large castle built into the side of the nearby mountain, and as I looked up at it now, amber light filled multiple windows, washing out the rest of the castle and making the windows seem like stars nestled against the gray cliffs of the mountain. Hale noticed my gaze and gave me a half smile, c*****g his head in the direction of the distant castle.

“The Alpha lives there,” he said shyly and with a little shrug.

"I figured as much," I answered with a little laugh. "I don't know many people who just live in castles for the hell of it."

He extended his arm to me, and I slipped my arm into his as he led us out of the front garden and down a darkened road.

We hadn't made it far before a rustling cut through the airy silence, and a group of four wolves darted across the pathway in front of us and back into the trees. I stiffened, but Hale chuckled softly, shaking his head.

"Better get used to it. You'll see a lot of that around here."

"Your village doesn't have limitations for when and where people can shift?"

"No, not at all. You can shift whenever you want, wherever you want."

"Hm." I smiled, watching a lone wolf dart out of the trees and sprint along the path in front of us before it disappeared into the treeline again. I'd heard some of the western packs were strict about shifting. "I can't shift yet."

"Really?"

"I'm not twenty one until this summer," I said with a shrug.

"I just turned twenty one last month," he said with a little sigh. "And honestly, it wasn't as intense as I thought it would be, you know? Turning into a wolf is cool and all, but it wasn't this big, magical event."

"That's actually nice to hear," I said with honesty. I was done with big, magical events. I'd be happy to never use an ounce of my powers again.

We continued down the gravel path, and eventually, the straight trail turned abruptly to the right, and through the trees, I could see more cottages scattered through the darkened woods, their porch lamps the only light cutting through the inky black night.

"How many people live here?" I asked.

"Oh, maybe sixty adults. I'm not sure how many children are around right now. This territory was only claimed thirty years ago. Most of the children born when the pack came into existence are having kids of their own now."

I wanted to ask him how many kids I'd be up against when school started, but I knew my voice would waver on the words.

"This place used to be home to a rogue tribe, but they were chased out of the area when the road was built through the northern continent. But some of the buildings in the village are from the era. It's an interesting history. At least I think so."

As he spoke, the village sprang up beneath us as he walked down a gentle hill. It was circular, with three loops of buildings and shops encasing what looked like a temple in the center. A few lights in the village were on, but it was easy to spot the diner, which was lit up like a lighthouse against an endless sea of night.

“Do you want some company while you eat?” he asked, then pursed his lips as I looked up at him. “That was forward. I’m sorry.”

“Do you always say sorry so often?” I teased.

He arched his brow, his mouth twitching into a smile. “I’m sorry—I mean, yeah. I guess I do.”

“You can eat with me if you want. I don’t know anyone else here except for Olive and the groundskeeper. I didn’t catch his name.”

“That would be Randell—nice guy, not much of a talker. Olive, though... how was she? I try to avoid her if I can.”

“She’s odd,” I laughed as we approached the diner, “but friendly enough. She offered me the job. I came here for the position of horticulturist for the Alpha, but it wasn’t available.”

“Huh,” he said, stopping short of the diner. “I didn’t realize that position was even open in the first place.”

He almost seemed like he was talking to himself, his eyes lost in faraway thought. He arched his brows, shaking his head a bit as he held open the door to the diner for me.

I walked inside, and Hale walked in behind me.

It was a dark, cozy place. Everything was dark wood and red velvet, which seemed odd given the patrons who took up the booths along the darkened windows. Men covered in grime and coal smears drank pints of beer, and a few women mingled in a group near a jukebox, turning their heads as we entered. One of the women was young, my age at the most, her curly golden brown hair piled in a bun on the top of her head. She looked surprised as she locked her gaze on Hale as we sat down in an empty booth, then narrowed her eyes on me.

“Don’t pay her any mind,” he smirked, nodding his head at her in greeting. “That’s my sister.”

“Oh—”

“Twin sister. She’s mad at me right now.”

“Why?”

“It changes every day,” he said with a shrug, picking up a menu. “Do you have any siblings?”

“Yes,” I said without thinking, then swallowed back the lie.

He eyed me for a moment before looking down at a laminated menu on the table. I was waiting for him to start asking where I was from, or about my family, but he didn’t. He ordered the “special,” whatever that was, and I did the same, hoping it was something I would end up liking.

“So you have no teaching experience?” he asked as I stirred a sugar packet into the iced tea I’d ordered.

“Not a bit, but I do have a lot of young cousins. That has to count for something.”

He sighed deeply, giving me a playful look through his lashes.

“What?” I asked, smiling at him before sipping my tea. “What’s that look for?”

“You’re in for it, is all. I’m sure Olive told you about the previous teachers. You’re teaching kindergarten, right?”

I pursed my lips. Had I told him that?

“Yeah, I am.”

“Hm, well. That particular class has gone through four teachers in the last three months alone.”

“What? Why?”

“Because they’re hellions. They’ll need a firm hand. I hope you’re up for it.”

My stomach twisted in a knot, but he chuckled beneath his breath, shaking his head.

“I’m joking—”

“Are you? You don’t seem like it—”

“They’re just little kids. You’ll be fine. My mom was a teacher for the longest time, up until her death, actually. Maybe you’ll enjoy it—”

“Who are you?” came a feminine voice beside me.

I jumped, startled, and almost spilled my drink as Hale’s sister appeared at my side. She looked down at me skeptically, twirling a rogue curl around her finger.

“Clare, this is Lena. Lena, Clare,” Hale gruffed, a hint of annoyance in his voice.

A waitress squeezed between Clare and the booth across the aisle from us, setting two plates on our table. Clare didn’t move at all; she just continued to stare at me, her blue eyes flashing with suspicion.

“Hi—”

“Are you a White Queen?”

“W-what?”

Oh, Goddess. I was going to have to make a run for it, and I prayed there was a bus coming to the station soon.

“Clare—” Hale began, but I cut him off.

“I get that a lot,” I said, faking kindness. “I was born with hair like this.”

“Uh-huh,” Clare said with narrowed eyes.

“Clare, come on.”

“What are you doing down here anyway, Hale?”

“Having dinner with a new friend,” he said, his eyes narrowed into slits as he looked up at his sister.

It was clear that they were twins, but they were opposites as well. Their faces were the same, but their coloring was different. Clare was fair, while Hale was dark. Their personalities couldn't have been more different, as well.

"Enjoy your fried chicken," she sneered at Hale.

Hale ran his tongue along his lower lip, then glared as she turned her back to us and began to walk away.

"I'm sorry Lena—"

"It's fine," I said, smiling at him as earnestly as possible.

"We don't get along," he added with a shrug.

"I wouldn't have guessed."

I laughed, but he didn't smile. He picked at his plate for a moment, then met my eye.

Before he could speak, a man came up to us, leaning over the table to whisper to Hale. Hale's face changed, his eyes darkening for a moment as the man leaned back away from him.

The knot in my stomach tightened as I heard the unfamiliar man's words drift across the table, a mere whisper against the lifted chatter in the diner.

Had he just referred to Hale as Alpha?

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 569

Xander

I realized quite suddenly that something was off about this place. I'd been following the orbs of light through the forest for what felt like ages. At first, I daydreamed. I went over my argument with Lena on the beach and the storm that had come out of nowhere.

I was going to ask her to marry me, but not there. Had her demonic little cousin not ratted me out for having a ring, I would have waited until the perfect moment and gotten down on one knee.

But I'd thought, at least at the time, that a discussion beforehand was the right thing to do given the situation. She knew I had the ring, so why not make my intentions clear and give us both a chance to talk about a probable future instead of just springing the question on her?

That conversation needed to happen regardless. The idea of being separated was the only thing keeping us apart, and I hadn't had the chance to sit Lena down and explain to her that it was likely we'd be apart for a very long time, and not because we were ruling different kingdoms, no.

War was coming. War was already happening in Crimson Creek. War was threatening both of our realms if I didn't stop it.

Her grandfather had passed me a note on the day of the wedding. He'd stared at me during the ceremony, no doubt trying to catch a glimpse of my answer in my eyes. When I'd gone to see him in Winter Forest, I'd told him everything I knew, warning him of what I believed was to come. I'd left to find Gideon and only found ruin.

And his note during the wedding? A simple question. “When?”

The longer I walked through the forest, the more time I had to wonder how the hell Rowan had been able to ship me off to Goddess knows where without me having had a chance to answer to the patriarch of the family first.

It didn’t make sense, but neither did the trees and flowers I passed that looked nearly identical. Neither was the strange vacuum of silence in the forest, not a bird nor rustle of leaves to be heard. The sky remained a pale pinkish violet, never once fading or brightening to show the changing of the hour, yet my legs were growing faint from hours upon hours of walking.

I paused, letting the orbs carry on without me, and gazed at a rock formation I could’ve sworn I’d seen before, just a few hours ago, actually. White roses bloomed from throned vines that snaked around the top of the rock, like a crown.

These vines weren’t even connected to the soil—

I whirled around, peering closely at the trees around me.

Perfect—everything was too perfect to be real.

I dropped to my knees and ripped at the grass, which was plush, blemishless, and as soft as cashmere.

Wrong, wrong! Everything was wrong!

“Where the f**k am I?!” I screamed with my fists clenched to my sides. Laughter ripped through the silence, fading away as the orbs disappeared from view.

“It’s not far now,” said the voice, but I shook my head, breathing heavily as I whirled around again.

“What are you? Who are you?”

“You’ve already asked that question. I don’t know. I just am.”

“This place isn’t real, is it? I’m dreaming? I’m dead?” I looked down at the ground. I’d just torn several fist-sized patches from the earth. I’d held them in my hands, felt the deep brown soil falling between my fingers. But now? The grass was untouched, long, green, and dappled with dew. “f**k me—”

“You’re not dead,” the voice said as though whoever or whatever was speaking was standing right behind me. It snickered into my ear. I punched the air wildly, which elicited more laughing.

“Then where am I?”

“The Builder’s realm,” said the voice with an air of pride.

“Who is the Builder?”

“The Goddess. You should be grateful she granted you entry to this place.”

The Goddess?

I chewed my cheek, staring blankly through the trees as reality crashed down on me.

“No way,” I said with a little laugh, shaking my head. “Hm, no. Nope. No, No—”

The answer should have been clear from the beginning when I opened my eyes to this place for the first time and realized I had no memory of leaving the beach. One minute I'd been standing in front of Lena, begging her to listen to me, and the next?

"You've gotta be f*****g kidding me!" I exclaimed, throwing my hands in the air in surrender. "What the f**k? What exactly did she do to me?"

"Who?" asked the voice, and this time its reply was not followed by mocking laughter.

"Lena, the motherfucking Moon Goddess, that's who. She zapped me here—"

"Zap?"

"She tossed me into this realm, however it works. Sucked me in. Does she know that I'm here? How do I get out?"

There was no answer.

So, I lost my mind. I started running, turning in random directions and sprinting as fast as I could into trees and bushes, wondering if I could break out of this place. I hurt myself over and over, my face bruised and skin torn from my attempts to climb trees and reach the top of the canopy that sheltered the forest floor, but every time I reached the upper branches, the tree would simply bend, dumping me back on the ground.

"LENA!" I screamed, but it was no use. She'd trapped me here.

"So, you know the Builder personally?" said the voice.

My skin crawled at the idea of some unseen entity watching my every move, but so far it, whatever it was, was the only other being around to converse with. I straightened my shirt, the same one I'd been wearing the morning I'd asked Lena's parents for their blessing, and examined the cuts and bruises on my hands that healed right before my eyes.

"She's my mate."

"Ah, so you ARE the man."

"I don't understand a f*****g word you say," I mumbled, picking a few twigs from my hair and flopping to the ground, my arms and legs outstretched. I was exhausted. I felt like I'd been up for days. I had no concept of time anymore. I closed my eyes and heard an annoyed sigh drift in the silent breeze that ruffled my hair, but didn't touch the trees or foliage around me, of course.

"We're not far—"

"Not far from what?"

"The Builder's garden—"

"I'm not going anywhere. I'm tired."

Silence. I opened one eye, watching for those strange white orbs, but saw nothing.

“I’ll go to this garden if you explain to me what you are. You’re some kind of spirit, right? Or are you a manifestation of Lena’s subconscious sent here to torture me?”

“The Builder, you mean—”

“Yes, for the love of the Goddess. What is this place? Am I... am I dream dancing right now? Is that what she calls it?”

The voice let out a low laugh, and I imagined it shaking its head at me.

“No. Are you familiar with the story of Leto?”

“Of course. Who isn’t?” I griped, knitting my hands over my chest and looking up into the canopy, watching the leaves. This place looked and felt like I was inside of a painting. The colors were vivid, dreamlike. If what the voice was saying was correct, Lena had made this place.

“Leto, the original Moon Goddess and the mother of your false God Lycaon—”

“False God?” I said with a little laugh.

“And Morrighan, the first White Queen. Leto and her children could build realms, but Morrighan never tapped into those gifts. Lycaon built your home realm as a final gift to his most devoted followers, those who followed him through the southern pass. Thus, your realm was born, and the White Queens remained in the realm Leto built when she separated from the realm of the Gods to be with her mate.”

“Is that where I am now? In the realm of the gods?”

The voice laughed, loud and boisterous.

“No, you’re not. Even the builder cannot enter that realm—not until she returns to them to rule as the Moon Goddess. But she has the powers of those gods. She doesn’t use them, not outside of this place.”

“She comes here?”

“Not often. Only once in the last five years—”

“Damnit,” I groaned, running my hands over my face. “Does she know I’m here?”

“It’s unlikely.”

“Why? How could she not know? This place has to be an extension of her mind!”

“Come to the Garden,” the voice urged.

I exhaled, then stood up and crossed my arms over my chest. “How long is this going to take?” I growled, looking around for the direction of the voice.

The trees rustled again, and then the orbs reappeared, showing me the way.

The only variance in the realm Lena had created was settled before me in a glen of sorts. There was an easy decline, and then a clearing was visible through a thicket of wide, weeping willow trees. A pond sat

in the center of the clearing, and a gentle waterfall trickled down over a far hill covered in white, smooth rocks I couldn't name. It was beautiful. It honestly took my breath away.

Specks of white light zoomed through the willow branches that hung so low they floated on top of the water.

I stepped into the clearing, and for the first time since I'd woken up in the forest, saw the sun shining above me, the rays warming my skin. There was a little blue building near the pond, and through the windows, I could see shelving filled with paint cans.

Did Lena paint? She'd never mentioned it. Curiosity got the best of the feelings of unease currently tying my stomach into knots as I walked forward and opened the door to the building. It was a shop, a studio, and smelled strongly of acrylic paint and dried flowers.

Canvases were propped up against a far wall, and a sketchpad was sitting on a worktable next to a multi-pane window.

I held up one of the canvases, tilting my head to try to make sense of what exactly she'd been painting.

"She's not very good," the voice deadpanned, and I smirked.

If I ever got out of the prison she was keeping me in, well, I'd make her paint something to make up for it, and I'd hang it in the foyer of whatever castle we ended up living in.

I spent some time rifling through the building but found nothing of substance to help get me out of the situation. All I really wanted to do was sleep.

So, I lay in the shelter of a willow tree, watching the branches dance across the water. The waterfall lulled me into a meditative stupor, but just as I closed my eyes....

"Adrian?" I whispered, opening my eyes to the voice that had suddenly filled my mind, frantic and confused.

But I was alone.

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 570

Lena

Needless to say, my friendly, welcoming dinner with Hale took an abrupt turn after finding out he was the Alpha of Cedar Hollow. He was embarrassed, and incredibly apologetic, as if it was something he was trying as hard as he could to hide.

I understood that feeling exactly, but couldn't tell him that. Instead, I asked him about his family and his pack and learned practically everything I needed to know about Cedar Hollow.

Hale wasn't supposed to be Alpha. That role should have gone to his older brother after their parents died. He didn't tell me how he'd ended up with the title, but I could tell by the look in his eyes that whatever had happened had been painful.

When he walked me back to the cottage later that evening, I felt somewhat at peace. I liked this place, and I liked Hale. Not in a romantic way, but it had been a long time since I'd just been able to be Lena for a night without the burden of my rank crushing against my shoulders.

But as I curled into bed that night, Xander filled my mind. I closed my eyes, imagining the curve of his jaw and the way his hair felt as I ran my fingers through it. I thought about the nights we'd spent laying back to back in our sleeping bags in Crimson Creek, and the nights we lay with our limbs tangled when we couldn't hold back any longer.

"Where are you?" I said aloud, running my fingertips over the dormant mark on my chest, tears clouding my vision.

"Do you have a husband?" asked a dark-haired boy, his brown eyes peering up at mine expectantly.

I'd been waiting for the opportunity to take a bite of a turkey sandwich for ten minutes now, which I hadn't had a chance to eat during lunch because I was busy meeting the rest of the teachers, and sighed in resignation as I set it down on a napkin and turned toward the five children standing in front of me, waiting for their parents to pick them up.

"No, I don't," I answered.

"Why not?"

"Is it because boys smell?"

"Boys don't smell, girls do!"

"Okay, okay, okay—" I laughed, raising my hands in surrender as the kids dissolved into lifted chatter.

The schoolhouse was situated in a grassy clearing toward the edge of the village, and it held classes for students of varying ages. The kindergarten class wasn't as big as I was expecting, but five was a great number, and my first day as their teacher had actually been quite a good time. We read a bunch of books, worked on spelling and arithmetic, and drew some pictures.

But the real treat had been taking the kids out into the wooded greenbelt beyond the school grounds on a nature excursion and watching them run wild.

Their parents were definitely going to question why they were covered in dirt and grass stains, but it was too beautiful and mild a day to let it go to waste, especially for early January.

I'd been in Cedar Hollow for a week now, when school was still on break for Winter Solstice, and felt about as settled as I could possibly be.

One by one, my five students ran to their parents as pack members began to appear near the entrance to the school. The bench I'd chosen to finish the lunch I hadn't had a chance to eat was soon home to me, and one of the two girls in my class. I gave them some crackers to nibble on so as not to be rude.

Sasha had just turned five before the cut-off date, the youngest out of the group, and in my opinion she was the brightest. She was shy, however, and had stuck by my side the majority of the day instead of playing with her classmates.

She was sitting next to me on the bench, swinging her legs, her pink tights stained green on the knees. She was twirling her golden braid around her finger, humming to herself as we waited for her parents. They were late.

“Who is picking you up today?” I asked.

Sasha’s blue eye locked on mine, and she shrugged as she continued to twirl her braid. “Mommy.”

“Okay, well, I’m sure she’s on her way—”

Sasha got up abruptly and ran forward before I could finish my sentence. Clare was walking right toward us, and as Sasha threw her arms around Clare’s knees, my heart dropped into my stomach.

“You’re the new kindergarten teacher?” Clare choked on a laugh as she patted the top of Sasha’s head.

“Uh, yes. I am.”

“Interesting.... Hmm. Well, I figured you were just another floozy jumping from pack to pack, climbing the ranks, if you know what I mean.”

“What?” I said, my voice lifted in shock. Her cool demeanor softened a bit, her richly blue eyes narrowing on me with interest as she looked me up and down. Her hair was tightly curled and every shade of blonde imaginable, piled on top of her head in a loose, messy bun. For the sister of an Alpha, she was dressed casually in loose jeans and a button-down shirt that was tucked into a leather belt. She adjusted the strap of her purse on her shoulder, giving me a once-over as Sasha began to skip around the two of us in a wide circle.

“You know,” she said with a sly grin, flicking her hand in dismissal.

“Oh, I’m not—I mean, I have a mate.”

“Mm. And where is he?”

Why had I said that? What had possessed me to say that out loud? My cheeks colored as I cleared my throat, praying to whoever was listening that she couldn’t see the heartbreak lingering behind my eyes.

Her face softened a bit, then she nodded, turning away from me when I couldn’t answer her question. She bent at the knees, smiling down at her daughter with the most loving expression I had seen in a while. My own heart squeezed, and guilt ripped through my soul as I thought of my own mother and the pain I’d most definitely caused her by running away.

“Go play for a bit, darling. We’ll go home in a moment.” Clare’s eyes flicked to mine as she rose to her full height. She was several inches taller than me and had to look down as she closed the distance between us. She walked like a model, and she looked like one too.

I was never intimidated, at least not often, and not by other women. But Clare was intimidating, and as her body cast a shadow over mine, I felt the overwhelming urge to cower.

“Are you related to Queen Rosalie of Winter Forest in any way?” she asked in a low tone, discreetly glancing around before meeting my eye again.

“Who?”

“Don’t tell me you don’t know who the White Queen is? Come on.”

“Oh, her,” I breathed, then shrugged, doing my best to look confused, and maybe a little disinterested.

“You just have the look of that family,” she said, leaning in a bit as she spoke. “You look familiar. Why? Where are you from? Your born pack?”

“Breles,” I lied, and she looked disappointed as she leaned away from me. “I recently graduated from Morhan University.”

“Morhan, huh? I guess I can’t say you’re unqualified for this position. What exactly are you doing teaching kindergarten? Morhan is a polytechnical institute—”

“My degree is in botany,” I said quickly, giving her my best professional smile. “And there’s not many jobs in that field. I came here for the horticulturist position, but when I arrived, the job was no longer available.”

“What a gamble, coming this far west,” she said, clucking at me with her tongue.

I gave her a tight smile, unsure of what to say next.

“Well, I have to say I’m delighted to know Sasha has such a well-educated teacher this year. I hope you plan to stick around.”

“I do—”

She took a single step toward me, now standing so close she had to lean down to whisper into my ear.

“Listen to me,” she said hurriedly, her tone changing abruptly. A rush of cold rippled up my spine as Clare gently held me by my forearm, pulling me closer to her as if she was in danger of being overheard. “If anyone comes here for Sasha, anyone at all, hide her. I don’t care where, but you hide her, and you find me. Do you understand?”

“Is she in danger?”

Clare paused, swallowing hard. I could feel her chest tightening as she gave me a single, silent nod. She backed away, letting go of my arm. Her face underwent an incredible change as she bit back the urgency of her words to me, her features returning to their original cold, intimidating mask.

“Sasha!” she called, and the golden haired girl came bounding over to us, taking her mother by the hand. Clare gave me a friendly nod and a smile, and then they left.

I was dumbfounded, adrenaline coursing through my veins as the two of them walked away.

“I’m just a kindergarten teacher,” I murmured, but was answered only by a bird flapping its wings behind me as it swooped down to the bench, stealing my sandwich.

I couldn't sleep. It was late, well past midnight, and I was seeking refuge against the corner cabinet in the kitchen of my cottage, a mug of rose scented tea clutched between my hands. It was raining again, but instead of creating a cozy ambiance, I felt claustrophobic and trapped in the confines of the cabin, my mind reeling from my conversation with Clare.

She hadn't said who was after her daughter, but the fear in her voice made me believe that person was nearby, or had at least been causing trouble for a while. My skin prickled with a chill, and I looked toward the hearth. I'd neglected it in the time I'd spent leaning against the cabinets, and I hadn't even touched my tea.

"I just wanted some normalcy," I said to myself, sniffing.

There was a knock on the door, and I jumped, startled by the sound. The tea spilled over the top of my mug, and thankfully it had gone tepid and didn't burn my skin as I set it on the counter with shaking hands.

Whoever was at the door was pacing back and forth, their shoes thumping on the porch. I'd just started toward the door when they pounded their fist against it, cursing audibly.

I furrowed my brow at the familiarity of the voice and reached the door in two quick steps.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I growled, reaching out and pulling the man inside.

He was soaking wet, his coat dripping all over the floor and his tawny blonde hair sticking to his face as he shivered and tilted his head toward the hearth.

"Living alone going well so far, huh?" Adrian smirked, but his eyes were dark. "Where the f**k is Xander?"