

Kings Breeder 571

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 571

Lena

"What do you mean?" I sneered as Adrian slammed the door shut behind him. His blue eyes narrowed on mine for a split second before peering around the room. "He's not here! I thought he went back to Egoren—"

"He didn't. I haven't heard from him in two weeks."

My heart dropped into my stomach as I searched Adrian's eyes for understanding. His gaze lingered on mine, furious and intense, but then he glanced at the dying embers in the hearth and bared his teeth.

"It's f*****g freezing," he sneered through chattering teeth as he shrugged off his sodden coat and let it drop to his ankles. He began stripping down while I stood there, shellshocked. "Do you have a blanket, or a towel?"

He was standing in only a wet undershirt and his boxers now, the fabric clinging wetly to his skin.

"Lena?"

"Yeah, I—I'm sorry."

I walked around one of the couches and tossed him a thick wool blanket before kneeling by the hearth and stoking the embers until they began to glow. I heard him slump into the armchair closest to the fire, his teeth chattering violently as I added a handful of kindling and bark to the embers. My fingers felt numb as I worked to stoke the fire into a hot blaze. The heat of the fresh flames so close to my hands did nothing for the chill that ran through me, and it wasn't from the cold.

"He hasn't contacted you?"

"Not at all," I replied, glancing over my shoulder at him before tossing a log on the fire and closing the grates.

His cheeks were pink with cold, and his wet hair was dripping onto the blanket, little puddles of moisture casting shadows over his shoulders.

"How did you find me?"

"Do you realize the chaos you caused in Avondale? Your family is in an absolute f*****g fit, Lena. Abigail told me where to find you," he bit out, his eyes reflecting from the flames like a mirror as he looked at me. "And don't worry. No one else knows where you are. That's what you wanted, right? Leaving behind only a note telling your parents you were sorry.... Your father is threatening war against Egoren. He thinks Xander ran off with you."

"He's what?" I rose onto my knees, my stomach clenching painfully as I wrung my hands together.

Adrian shook his head, his mouth tightening into a smirk. "Yeah. You heard me correctly. I almost got arrested by your uncle's warriors just for showing up at the palace. The only reason they let me go is

because I explained that I was there for Xander regarding Crimson Creek, and your grandfather stepped in—”

“Crimson Creek?” I interrupted, rising to my feet. “What about it?”

“What do you mean, what about it?”

I blinked down at him. I prayed he could see the confusion and panic behind my eyes.

“Xander hasn’t told you s**t, has he?”

I shook my head, and Adrian groaned dramatically as he leaned his head back against the armchair and closed his eyes.

“You two are a mess, you know that? I’ve never met two people so dead set on self-sabotage—”

“Excuse me?” I snapped, crossing my arms over my chest. “What the hell do you want, Adrian? I don’t know where Xander is. He left, for all I know. We fought, and then he was just... gone. I had my back turned to him for a second and when I turned back around he was gone. I haven’t seen him or heard from since that day, and I left Avondale a few days later. I have a job now. I have a home, and a new pack. I have no plans to go to Avondale, or Valoria, or anywhere for that matter. Whatever mess Xander created that he’s running from is not my problem—”

“Something is wrong, Lena. That’s why I came here, to find you. Xander wouldn’t just disappear—”

“He’s disappeared on me multiple times!” I cried, my pain and heartbreak spilling over the edge of my calculated grip on my composure. Tears rolled off my eyelashes and streamed down my cheeks, trailing along my jaw as I gripped my arms, hugging myself. “I loved him, Adrian. He broke my heart over and over and lied to me. He hasn’t told me anything about Crimson Creek, you’re right. He wouldn’t. He couldn’t even give me the peace of mind of knowing the warriors for Breles were still there looking for signs of Elaine and Henry. I don’t know how Bethany is doing, or what Gideon and his family are up to. Xander is a liar, a manipulator, and I hope I never, ever see him again.”

Adrian pressed his tongue against the inside of his lower lip, shaking his head slowly from side to side.

“You’re wrong about him—”

“Am I? If I was wrong, he’d be here right now. He would’ve chased me here and tried to make things right, but he’s not that kind of man—”

“You don’t realize what he’s done for you, to keep you safe.”

“I don’t need saving!”

“For f**k’s sake, Lena. You do. You do need saving because you refuse to save yourself. You refuse to use your powers. You refuse to learn. You’re stuck in this fantasy world you created based on your own fear of who you really are, and Xander has stuck his neck out for you time and time again!” Adrian rose, the wool blanket cocooned around him the only thing to soften the look of pure hatred lining his features. His stance and expression sent a shock through my system. He looked terrifying, and for the first time, I noticed the faint scars that rippled over his cheeks and the bridge of his nose, the patches of white skin highlighted by the fire that was now roaring in the hearth.

“He loves you, and he’s a fool for it in my opinion. He came to this realm to find a wife with White Queen blood that wouldn’t die bearing his heir, and he chose you. He loved you, against his better judgment.”

“You’re a f*****g bastard!”

“YOU,” he said hotly, narrowing his eyes on me, “haven’t given him any credit for what he’s done to protect you. And unless you help me find him, you won’t have the chance.”

“Xander and I are nothing!” I cried. “He didn’t even have the decency to reject our bond so I could move on. Adrian, for the love of the Goddess, you don’t understand—”

“Xander and I have killed together. Did you know that? Has he ever mentioned his time fighting the wars in our homeland, the bloodshed he tried to end? He saved my life more than once, and those acts bound me to him for life. I am his Beta, but I’m also his friend, and I know him. I know him, okay? And I know that something is wrong—”

“What do you want me to do, Adrian?”

“Help me find him. Despite what you think of him, he wouldn’t abandon you. I’ve never seen him like he was around you. He told me, that day he ran into you and Slate on campus.... He said he’d found her. He found ‘the one.’ He was f*****g giddy, if you can believe it. I thought that meant we were packing up to go home, but he refused to just... just take you back to Egoren. He said you were his mate. I believed him. And I believe him now.”

I didn’t have the words to convey my feelings. I felt like I was being ripped to shreds, and rightfully so. Adrian hadn’t been wrong at all about his description of me. No matter how badly it hurt to admit, he was right. I was a coward. I ran when things get tough. I hid when I get scared. I’d been hiding, and running, my entire life.

Xander had been one of the only people in my life who embraced me for my faults. He was also the only person who had ever pushed me to be better, to learn... and most importantly, he’d done so without putting me into a box and forcing me to go somewhere, and be something that I didn’t want to be.

But his omission of an incredibly painful truth had hit me like a freight train as I looked up at Adrian, tears clouding my vision.

“He was going to propose to me. He’d asked for my parents’ blessing. He had a ring and everything. We were arguing about how this all could possibly work. And then he told me... he told me I couldn’t have children, because of what happened—”

“When you killed that hybrid monster?”

“Yes.”

“I wouldn’t put much stock into anything those people in Crimson Creek told him,” Adrian said with a drawn-out sigh as he sank back into the armchair. His shoulders relaxed, and he c*****d his head toward the couch.

I sat down, and whatever strength I had left within me vanished as I slumped into the cushions. “Why?”

“Xander will explain when we find him. It’s not for me to say. He made me promise. He ordered me, as his Beta and subject, to let him be the one to explain what happened. But we’re running out of time now, and I’m worried, Lena, that everything is going to go to s**t and we’re never going to see him again.”

“You have to tell me—”

“There’s going to be a war, that’s all I know. Your grandfather knows, and is acting on it.”

“What—”

“Xander told him about everything that happened in Crimson Creek, from the moment you two arrived in the village to the day you left.”

The blood drained from my face as Adrian went on, telling me about how Xander had traveled straight to Winter Forest and pleaded his case for assistance to my grandfather in a realm that was not his own. He’d left the same day we’d parted ways at the train station in Morhan.

My heart began to shatter as Adrian went on, and on, about how Xander was sounding a rallying cry for forces to defend the west against an enemy no one knew about.

“The Alpha of Crimson Creek can’t have an army that large,” I protested, gripping the couch’s armrest.

Adrian looked into my eyes and flexed his jaw, then gravely shook his head.

Through the flames reflecting in his deep, sea blue eyes came a vision from my fevered nightmares.

The man dressed in black, his face swallowed by a gruesome shadow as night surrounded us, choking us with its embrace, his teeth long and yellowed in the light of a full moon. And when his eyes met mine...

I’d seen nothing but death.

“We need to find Xander. You bare his mark, Lena. I need your help,” Adrian whispered in surrender.

I nodded, then rose to my feet.

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Lena

Adrian made himself at home, much to my annoyance. He was messy, and he tended to come into the cottage and leave a trail of clothing items behind him, as well as walking away from half-empty mugs of tea. He’d gone through all the books I’d unpacked, leaving them in random places around the cottage, and every morning when I left for the schoolhouse, I’d find him standing in the kitchen drinking coffee in nothing but MY robe, which barely covered his thighs.

He was unphased by my presence. He was fixated solely on locating his Alpha, and complained frequently about the fact that I could only spare so many hours a day trying to activate the bond between us. Mind-linking with Xander had failed, and the mark on my chest was dormant, nothing but a smooth, half-moon scar.

Four days had passed since the night Adrian arrived. I had no friends in Cedar Hollow, so no one seemed to notice anything odd about Adrian hanging around the village or walking back to my cottage.

But on the fifth day, a Friday evening to be exact, something changed.

I was making dinner, decompressing after another day teaching my kindergarteners. We'd spent most of the day outside, turning the soil in the long-neglected garden on the school grounds. This spring, I planned to teach them how to garden, and I was looking forward to it.

But I found myself increasingly protective of Sasha after my strange conversation with Clare on my first day of class. Any time someone I didn't recognize walked by the classroom, I moved closer to the girl, close enough to reach out and grab her up if I needed to. Clare hadn't said a single word to me since that day, not in the morning during school drop-off or in the afternoon during pick-up. I'd even seen her at the market, and she didn't even look in my direction.

Tonight, however, I heard Adrian open the rickety front gate, and he wasn't alone.

Hale and Adrian walked into the cottage without knocking, and only Hale looked in my direction and smiled in greeting. I gave him a tight smile of my own before flicking my gaze toward Adrian, glaring at him as he kicked his boots off in two different directions and continued his conversation with Hale.

"What's for dinner?" Adrian asked as he tossed his weight into one of the couches.

"Whatever you decide to cook for yourself," I said with mock sweetness, then moved my gaze to Hale. "Hello, Alpha."

"Hale is fine," he replied, giving me a boyish smile. Adrian snorted, rolling his eyes. The potato and leek soup I was cooking began to boil, and I turned away from the men to stir the large enamel and cast iron pot. The entire cottage smelled like the bread I was baking in the wood-fired oven. It was heaven—at least it had been until Adrian showed up and ruined my serenity.

The men were talking in hushed tones near the hearth while I set the table. I donned oven mitts and carefully pulled the loaf of bread from the oven, the skin crackling and perfectly bubbled. I smiled to myself, exhaling as I slid the butter dish toward the center of the table and took a step back to look at my evening of hard work.

I'd made enough to share, of course. Adrian might be the most aggravating person I'd ever met in my entire life, but I wasn't going to let him starve. He was spending every day gathering information, and the day before he had been gone for nearly eighteen hours because he took the morning bus to Red Lakes and caught the evening bus back to Cedar Hollow, a ten-hour round trip journey.

No one had seen a tall, striking man fitting Xander's description this far north and west.

As I set the pot of soup on the table, I heard Hale and Adrian talking about Xander, and Hale glanced at me, his eyes clouded with sudden suspicion.

I stiffened, meeting Adrian's eyes. Had he told him who I really was? Surely not.

Before I could finish laying out the food, Hale announced his departure. He gave me a soft smile as he shrugged on his coat, then disappeared into the night. I fought back a pang of disappointment as I took one of the three bowls I'd laid out on the table and put it back in the cupboard.

"No meat?" Adrian complained as he sat down at the table.

I glared at him as I pulled out my chair. "There's a few steaks in the fridge. I picked them up today."

"Soup is fine," he said with a wry smile. "Thank you for cooking."

I kept my eyes narrowed on his as I served myself a bowl of soup and a chunk of bread dripping with butter. The meal wasn't as good as the food I'd be served at Castle Drogomor or the Palace of Avondale, but I was learning to take care of myself away from the cafeteria at school, and that counted for something.

"So, you met the Alpha of Cedar Hollow?"

"Yeah, and that man wants nothing more than to get you in his bed."

I choked on my soup so violently that Adrian stood up and leaned over the table to pat me vigorously on the back. I swatted him away as my eyes watered.

"Are you going to live?" he teased as I took a large gulp of water.

"He doesn't--"

"Oh, he does. Don't worry, I told him I was your husband."

"You WHAT?"

Adrian grinned, then bent to eat his soup. I was fuming, and leaned back in my chair holding my spoon like a weapon. I was tempted to toss it at him, aiming right between his eyes.

"Does it really matter? Once we find Xander, we're out of here, anyway."

"I'm not leaving. And you've been searching for him in these parts for days. He's obviously not here."

"Well, you could help me, you know. Use your mate bond."

"It doesn't work that way," I hissed, stirring my soup.

We ate in silence for the rest of dinner.

Adrian was leaning on the porch railing, a mug of tea in his hands. Steam was wafting from the mug, pale ribbons of moisture snaking into the clear, star filled sky. I was sitting in a rocking chair wrapped in the thickest blanket I could find and listening to Adrian point out the constellations with boyish enthusiasm.

"Rare to find a night sky like this in your realm, huh? So many people."

I shifted my weight in the rocking chair and shrugged, still vexed from our conversation over our supper.

“Did you know that the constellations are opposite in Egoren?” he asked, glancing over his shoulder at me. “Everything here is all turned around, and you’re missing some.”

I did find that interesting, but I was currently giving Adrian the cold shoulder. He’d followed me out here and was making no moves to go back inside.

He glanced at me, huffing slightly as he turned around to face me with his hands over his chest.

“It’s time to get serious about this Lena—”

“I already told you I can’t help you find him. He obviously doesn’t want to be found.”

“I think he’s in trouble.”

“What exactly do you expect me to do, Adrian?”

“Use your powers.”

I bristled and shook my head.

“Lena, you need to help me. Your realm depends on it.”

“See, I wouldn’t actually know that because you and Xander are keeping me in the dark about the threat. You could be lying, for all I know.”

“I’m not lying, Lena. Xander—”

“Xander commanded you to not say anything to me, I get it. You made it very clear.”

“He’s trying to keep you safe. We both are.”

“I AM safe. And Xander’s not here, okay? I think you should leave.”

“You are his mate, and you’re a White Queen. I need you to do whatever it is you can do with your powers to find—”

“You know so little about the White Queens, Adrian. What do you think we can do, exactly? Locate people with our minds like a GPS?”

He scowled. “You’re more than a White Queen, Lena. And you should start acting like it.”

The front gate swung open and smacked against the fence, making us both jump.

Clare walked up the path, her mouth curved into a smug smile.

I stood up abruptly, and Adrian turned, putting himself between me and the woman who was still a stranger to him.

“Well, well. You could have just told me the truth about who you were, Ms. Grayleigh,” Clare clucked as she reached the foot of the steps leading up to the porch. “Or is just Gray? You’re Selene Gray, Princess of Valoria, aren’t you?”

I didn’t say a word. I was frozen in place. Adrian chuckled, rolling his eyes as he tilted his head toward Clare.

“One of your local friends?” he asked me.

I opened my mouth to speak, but Clare set one of her feet on the stairs, her hands on her hips.

“Mm... I wouldn’t say we’re friends.” Clare met my eye, and I was expecting malice, but what I saw there startled me. She looked relieved.

“Clare?” I said as she stepped up onto the porch, a shadow falling over her face as she looked from me to Adrian.

“I need your help,” she said in a strained whisper.

Adrian straightened up a bit, glancing at me out of the corner of his eye as Clare moved in on us.

“Are you... related to Hale?” Adrian asked, but I nudged him in the ribs to quiet him.

Clare nodded, giving a somewhat morose shrug of her shoulders. “I heard you’ve been searching for a man,” she began, tilting her head toward Adrian. “And he’s your mate, Lena, correct?”

I tried to explain to Clare that Xander likely didn’t want to be found, but Adrian put a hand up, silently begging me to just shut up and let Clare help. Clare flicked her eyes between Adrian and me, and then turned to me, extending her hand.

“You cannot tell anyone about this. I was never here.”

“Okay,” I replied, and felt a shock run through me as she wrapped her fingers in mine.

Adrian eyed us with heavy skepticism, his fair brows arched as Clare gripped my fingers.

“I have the power of sight. I can help you find this man, but you have to help me as well. A deal must be made.”

“You have the power of sight?” Adrian asked.

She nodded, her eyes not leaving mine. “And you do as well, don’t you?” she said to me in particular.

I felt as though I was under a spell. I nodded, unable to hesitate or protest.

“You have to find someone for me first,” she whispered. “What do you know of the pack Lycenna?”

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Xander

I wasn’t sure how long I’d been in the garden of Lena’s creation. I spent what felt like hours screaming her name into the sky, trying to mind-link with her, and tearing the place apart to get her attention. But no matter how much destruction I caused to the shop that housed her painting supplies, or even the bark and branches I’d stripped off the weeping willows, the second I turned my back, everything went back to the way it was, totally untouched.

I could have been here for days, weeks... I didn’t know. I wasn’t hungry. I wasn’t even tired and found myself lying down in the grass and closing my eyes out of sheer boredom rather than exhaustion. But I needed to get out, and soon. There had to be a way.

The all-seeing voice that was my constant, and only, companion was no help at all. Whoever it was seemed oblivious to any breaks in this handcrafted realm. The voice didn't know its name and had no sense of its history or origin. At first, I thought the voice was a manifestation of Lena's consciousness and spent a great deal of time pleading with it to free me, but I slowly found out it was the realm itself talking to me. It was new, infantile, and just as curious and desperate for information as I was.

Lena had created a god for this realm without knowing it. Of that, I was sure.

So, I told it everything. I laid in the grass with my arms crossed behind my head and told it the stories of my realm, of our God Lycaon, every fable and tall tale I could think of. I told it of Lena's realm, her pack lands, her lineage, and the myths and legends of what was considered the birthplace of our kind. I couldn't shift here, but I tried. I'd get close and feel my body giving way to the transformation, but then I'd snap back out of it. The voice wanted to see me as a wolf, however, and pushed me to try harder, to dig deeper into those powers.

But it was no use.

I wasn't willing to give up, but I was running out of ideas for how to escape.

I didn't have time for this. I was so incredibly angry at Lena, but I had a sneaking suspicion she hadn't done this on purpose. I was a victim of her refusal to acknowledge her powers.

When I got out of here, the first thing I was going to do was force her to accept her true self, and then force her to learn what she was capable of. I had to, and not just for her, but for the safety of everyone and everything around her. If she could build realms... what could she do to the realms already in existence?

"I'm leaving," I announced to the voice, but received no reply. Where I was going, I had no idea, but I couldn't spend a single second more sitting in the garden and mulling over Lena and her powers. A walk would do me some good, and I needed to reflect on the other pressing situations I was dealing with before Lena blasted me into oblivion.

Crimson Creek, the hybrids, the mutant wolf-like creatures who roamed the area of the West—I was supposed to be handling it all and reporting back to Ethan. Hell, I was supposed to be there now.

I rose from my usual spot in the cashmere-like grass and stretched, groaning as I lifted my arms over my head and splayed my fingers. I'd never spent this much time laying down or relaxing. My body wasn't used to being idle. As my body creaked and ached, I realized I needed this movement more than I initially thought.

I left the garden in no particular direction and walked for hours, and hours, and hours—at least I thought so. The sky didn't change. It remained bright, a soft violet that peeked through the canopy of leaves over my head as I trudged forward, running my fingertips along any tree trunks I passed.

Eventually, I came to a clearing that I hadn't seen during my other explorations of the realm. Strange, twisted trees grew there, their leaves black and dusted with something that glittered in the trickle of sunlight that reached this place. A chill ran up my spine as I looked around, and then down at my feet where the emerald grass gave way to crunching, ashen blades of night. This place looked... diseased. It

was so unlike the rest of the realm she'd created, and I was sure I'd been just about everywhere. This realm was tiny in comparison to Lena's and my own realms. It was a circle I could transverse in only hours based on how long I could walk in a straight line before I ended up in the garden again.

But this place? How had I never come across this place before?

I took a cautious step into the clearing, the dead, black grass snapping and turning to dust beneath my weight.

Beyond the clearing the light faded into a deep purple, dusted with stars, but they were fragmented, little specks of light that looked all wrong, like they'd exploded and left nothing but flakes of starlight behind. And then, at the end of the clearing, there was nothing but a black, glimmering pool of water.

I swallowed, glancing over my shoulder toward the healthy trees and colorful foliage from which I'd come, then walked fully into the shadowed clearing with a lump fixed firmly in my throat.

Then, I smelled it—sharp and acrid. My nostrils flared as the scent traveled up my nose and filled with nothing but dread.

Blood root. Everything here was covered in blood root.

I licked my lower lip as I continued toward the pool. I knew this wasn't of Lena's creation. This was something else entirely, something sinister and broken. The voice had mentioned Lena had made this realm long ago, as a child. Had this blackened place been a product of her injuries in Crimson Creek? Had she known this was even here?

I almost called out to the voice but thought better of it. It wasn't here with me now, I knew that much. Those little orbs of light that danced in constant rhythm around me in the garden hadn't followed me like usual. They were busy, it seemed, doing whatever they had to do other than keep me company.

The voice would have told me this place was here. Any question I'd asked, it had done its best to answer in its infantile way.

"Hello?" I whispered, but there was no sound here; not even the gentle black waves lapping against the edge of the clearing made a shred of noise. Silence—it was a vacuum of total, unnerving silence.

I felt a tug within my chest, my heart squeezing then releasing. I gasped, reaching up to touch the mark Lena had left on me that burned with sudden, painful vigor.

"Lena? Lena!" I croaked, whirling around as if she'd materialized behind me. Voices drifted around me, soft and feminine, two of them, distant and separate, a quiet conversation I couldn't decipher. "LENA!" I bellowed as the chatter pitched in volume, embracing me.

I stumbled backward as the pain from the mark began to radiate through my body, prickling over my skin in sparks of heat. She was here, right? That had to be why. But where? In the garden? She was calling to me through the mark, through the bond.

"I'm here!" I cried out, whirling around to the blackened pool.

The voices began to fade, and I panicked, taking a shuddering breath before taking several long strides toward the edge of the pool.

The burning in the mark began to fade as I screamed her name over and over. Why couldn't she hear me? This was her realm, wasn't it? Couldn't she just appear before me?

A soft hum drifted off the water, a song of sorts. I recognized the rhythm from my childhood, but couldn't find the words in a distant memory lost to time. All of my senses were on fire as I panted several ragged breaths and realized with a start what this place had to be, and why I'd heard Lena, or what I thought was Lena, speaking in a soft murmur.

This was a break in the realm. An entrance, and exit, something that shouldn't be here—but its existence was undeniable. The water had to be the way out, and in, to this place.

"I'm coming. I'm getting out. Stay where you are!" I commanded, knowing full well that Lena likely couldn't hear me. I stepped into the water but my foot didn't touch the floor below. I fell in, sinking as though the pool was full of sand, grit, and salt.

Down I sank, unable to kick my legs and tread the water. I fought against whatever force was pulling me down into oblivion, but suddenly I dropped onto my back, landing with a violent thud on what felt like pure rock. I cried out, gasping for breath as I opened my eyes to darkness.

It was night, but no stars shone in the moonless sky. I sat up with great effort, looking over my surroundings. Mountains sprung up in the distance, casting long shadows over the rocky, barren landscape. I sucked in my breath as I looked up into a swirling mass of matter only a few feet above my head—the entrance to Lena's realm.

"What have you done?" came a familiar voice, and I turned my head and sucked my breath in shock. Adrenaline made my vision blur as I struggled to my feet.

"Henry?" I gasped, looking at the old man standing before me.

He looked the same as the last time I'd seen him. He was even wearing the same clothes. His eyes were wide as he looked from me to the entrance to Lena's realm.

"Go back! Go back and have her close the door to this realm!" he demanded, his cheeks flaming with fury. Fear flashed behind his eyes as a screech ripped through the air below us.

"What is this place? Where have you been?" I barked, but Henry shook his head as he hurried forward and pushed against me.

"Go back. You have to go back—"

"Henry!" I pushed him hard enough to send him staggering backward. "Where are we? I thought you were dead!"

"We're both dead if we're seen—" There was another screech, and this time nearby. Henry froze as the sound split my eardrums in two, and both of us cowered and covered our ears. "No time," he whispered, and he grabbed the sleeve of my shirt as he pulled me toward him and motioned down what looked like a bluff. In the distance, I could see a cave, nothing more than a black hole in the side of the mountain we were standing atop.

“You’ve been here the whole time?” I hissed in a gravelly whisper as he pulled me along the rocks. How the hell had he made it up to this point, anyway? The entrance to Lena’s realm was at the top of a f*****g mountain, now that I had a chance to look around.

“You need to hide until sunrise, then go back. Do you understand? I’ll tell you everything. I will. But you have to promise to never come back to this place, and never, ever let Lena know of its existence.”

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Lena

Clare paced in front of the hearth, her hands tucked behind her back. Occasionally she’d pause and face Adrian and me, but then shake her head and continue to move back and forth in deep concentration as she gathered her thoughts.

Adrian was losing his patience. It was late, damn near the middle of the night, and I could see the lines of fatigue shading his eyes as he crossed his arms over his chest and waited, and waited, for Clare to speak.

“You have to tell us if you know anything about the pack Lycenna,” I said softly, trying my best to hide the urgency in my voice. Lycenna had been a secret, cult-like pack deep in the eastern mountains of Valoria and had fallen some twenty years ago, their Alpha’s death causing an internal war that splintered the pack into factions. They had been dangerous followers of Lycaon, and bred their women to create what they hoped were powerful lines of Dream Dancers. My grandmother had been from the pack Lycenna, but she had escaped with her mother as an infant.

Long ago now, a group of survivors from Lycenna’s inner war had passed through Winter Forest before going north over the endless, bleak tundra. They’d never been seen or heard from again.

“Sasha is with the servants at the castle,” Clare murmured, even though no one had asked. She seemed to be talking to herself, reassuring herself that Sasha was alright. “Hale should be there by now...”

“Clare!” I ground out, arching my brows as she turned to face me. “What is going on?”

She chewed her bottom lip, looking me up and down before taking a shallow breath and shifting her weight to one leg, her hands resting casually on her hips.

“My mother was a Lycennia refugee,” she said flatly, waving a hand in dismissal as though it wasn’t a big deal at all.

“What? How?” I pressed, gripping the top of the couch as I stood and watched a bored expression flit across her face.

“Do I really need to get into all of that?”

“Yes,” Adrian and I said in tandem.

Clare chewed the inside of her lip, shrugging as she let her shoulders slump. “I don’t know the details of the story, but somehow she ended up here and my father got her pregnant. Cedar Hollow was brand new, you know. She left us when we were kids, and I have no idea where she went.”

“Is that who you’re keeping Sasha away from?” I asked, but Clare scowled, shaking her head.

“I’m keeping Sasha away from her father, okay? He’s Lycennian as well. He was an infant when the last of the Lycennians went north over the Tundra. He showed up here one day and, well, you know—” she shrugged, trying her best to look uninterested in the conversation, but the hurt behind her eyes was undeniable. Adrian huffed a breath, but it wasn’t out of impatience. I glanced at him, seeing the sudden fury behind his eyes.

“Were you together... as a couple?” he asked sternly. Clare hesitated, then shook her head. Adrian’s cheeks burned. “He took advantage of you then?”

“Yes,” she replied without hesitation, and I felt a lump form in my throat.

“Oh, Clare—”

“I don’t need your sympathy,” she said shortly, her eyes narrowed into cat-like slits. “I need you to help me locate him so he can be dealt with.”

“Killing him would be easy enough,” Adrian began, but Clare rolled her eyes.

“He’s one of them,” she began with a ragged breath, “a Dream Dancer... not a strong one from what he said. He knew I was Lycennian. I don’t know how, but he did. I turned down his advances but he overpowered me. He... he ensured what he’d done would result in a pregnancy, you know. He, uh—”

“Knotted you?” Adrian said through gritted teeth.

I winced, finding it hard to swallow.

Clare blinked a few times, clearing the glassy moisture from her eyes before nodding.

“Oh, Goddess—” I breathed, bringing my hands to my face. This was just awful, unforgivable. I felt like a monster for ever thinking a harsh, unkind thought about Clare.

“He was hoping your child would have powers,” Adrian went on, a statement rather than a question. Clare nodded shortly, then shrugged, her eyes downcast on the floor. “So, does she?”

“Not that I know of—”

“But you have the power of sight—” he pressed.

Clare glared at him, her expression cutting his words short. “Enough to know darkness is coming. I can’t will the future into my vision, okay? But I can feel it. Something is coming—”

“A war,” Adrian interrupted sharply, holding up his hand to cut me off as I opened my mouth to protest. “That’s what you’re seeing.”

She eyed him with suspicion. I swallowed hard, tilting my head as I looked over Clare’s face.

“What does he look like?” I asked. “So I know who to look out for?”

“She shouldn’t be out in public in the first place,” Adrian said before Clare could reply to my inquiry.

Clare's eyes shot to him, narrowing into a scowl. "It's not her fault, you prick. She's just a kid, and I won't deny her being as such."

Adrian raised his brows in surprise at Clare's harsh tone, but he said nothing further as Clare's gaze drifted to me.

"He's tall, very tall, with blond hair and black eyes."

"So he looks Lycennian?" I said, almost to myself.

She shrugged, nodding as I went over what I knew about that pack and their strange, interbred genetics. Blond hair and black eyes had been common for the ruling house of Lycenna, but some had darker hair and skin, with pale gray eyes not unlike my own.

"Where would he be? Does he know about her?" Adrian pressed.

Clare gave him a final steely glare before erasing her cold expression and going silently neutral. "He knows about her, yes. Hale ran him out of town when it happened, but he came back exactly nine months later and found out about the baby who'd been born at the castle, a girl child... the bastard child of the teenage princess of Cedar Hollow." Clare swallowed back what sounded like shame, and my heart began to shatter as I looked into her eyes. Sasha was five, and Clare, as Hale's twin, would have just turned twenty-one. "I was sixteen when she was born," she continued, as though she'd been reading my mind.

Fury rippled through me, settling in my fingertips. That heat I could will into light and power surged forward, threatening to spill over as I thought about what Clare had been through, and what she was going through now.

I looked at Adrian, who was red in the face and quite upset. He glanced at me long enough to see the silent plea in my eyes and sighed, surrendering to my internal demand.

"I'm not Lycennian," he began. "But my people are also followers of Lycaon and his teachings...." He began to explain the Dark Realm to Clare, who listened intently but kept her face cold and controlled.

But Adrian kept talking, and kept talking, and before I knew it, he had spilled everything to Clare. He talked about Xander, and about me, and gave her the real reason I was here, as well as his reasons for finding me despite my not wanting to be found. I couldn't do anything but listen, and secretly hoped he spilled whatever secrets he was keeping from me about Crimson Creek, the secrets he'd told me were Xander's to tell.

An hour passed based on the chiming of the grandfather clock along the far wall, and Clare turned her head to it, noticing the time.

"You seriously lost your Alpha?" she said shortly, snorting with mirth.

Adrian narrowed his eyes at her and tucked his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

"He left," I replied, unable to hide the hurt in my voice.

Clare's eyes flicked to mine, understanding flashing across her features. "Do you want to find him?"

“Yes,” Adrian said quickly, but I hesitated.

Clare noticed this and flexed her jaw, her gaze leaving mine to eye Adrian with interest.

“It’s up to her, as his mate. If the bond is still intact, I may be able to give you an idea of where he is—”

“I want a full picture,” Adrian interrupted.

“I don’t get visions like that,” she snapped, “only feelings, color, light.”

“Hmm,” Adrian grunted, shaking his head. “So useful.”

“I want to know that he’s safe,” I said beneath my breath as I wrung my hands together. “That’s all. I want to know he’s alive, and safe, wherever he is.”

Clare nodded once, giving Adrian a dirty look before she turned to me. “In return... I want you to take Sasha—”

“Take her?” I repeated, unsure I’d heard her correctly. “What do you mean?”

“Get her out of here. Take her to your family... to your grandmother, the White Queen!”

“I’m not returning to my family—”

“Yes, you are. And she will, okay?” Adrian said with a sharpness that cut through me like a knife. I glanced between them, utterly backed into a corner.

“He’ll come for her,” Clare said hoarsely, her voice choking with emotion. “I don’t know what he’ll do to her, but I’m afraid—”

“I won’t let that happen,” I surrendered, mulling over my options in my mind. I hadn’t been in Cedar Hollow for two weeks and was already having to think about abandoning my dreams once again.

But I could do it for a child. I could return to my family, to their cloak of unity and safety, if it meant keeping a child safe from harm. Adrian seemed pleased, thankful he’d won this battle, at least.

“So, how do we do it?” he asked Clare.

Clare inhaled deeply, then tilted her head to me, offering me her hand. I hesitated before I took it, and then let her close her fingers around mine.

“Think of him,” she whispered as she closed her eyes.

I did as I was told, closing my eyes as well and letting my mind go blank and succumb to darkness.

“Do you see him?”

I pictured Xander in my bed in Avondale, his face relaxed in a deep sleep. I felt my mouth tugging into a pained smile, and I nodded.

But suddenly Clare’s hand tightened around mine so painfully I winced and tried to pull away, but she held me firmly, preventing me from moving. I opened my eyes, noticing her panting, and Adrian came up behind her, his hand on her back.

“What do you see?”

“Nothing,” she replied in a strained whisper, her grip causing my bones to scrap together. “I feel... I feel—”

I heard him... Xander, calling out my name. I looked around the room as his voice echoed through my mind, frantic and angry. The mark on my chest began to burn, tugging me in every direction.

“Stay where you are!” he said into my soul, and I found it hard to breathe.

But then it was silent, and through the bond I felt his fear, shock, and surprise.

“Xander?” I said in a choked whisper, tears welling in my eyes.

“What happened? What did you see?”

Clare let go of my hand, her face drained of color. She turned to Adrian, then looked at me, her brows furrowed and eyes glistening with tears. “Who’s Henry?”

Sold as the Alpha King’s Breeder Chapter 575

Lena

Adrian was gone before I’d risen from bed the next day. A scribbled note on the dining room table simply said he’d be back in a week’s time, and that was it. Clare had gone home shortly after I heard Xander’s voice ring out through my soul, her face lacking its normal luster and her eyes distant, shadowed with confusion.

She said she’d felt fear and chaos.

I felt worse now than I had when Xander disappeared. I knew in my gut that something was wrong, and that nagging feeling I’d been ignoring that told me he hadn’t just run off and left me for good was sounding in my mind as I made the strongest cup of coffee imaginable and sat on the front porch, letting soft gray daylight drift over my skin.

I closed my eyes and reached for the little thread of power I knew I had that tied me to those people like Clare who had the power to see—or feel, in her case—into the future and decipher the mysteries of the present. But that power I knew I possessed had been lying dormant for so long. It was just out of reach as I opened my eyes again, watching as the clouds darkened and trickles of rain began to patter against the thatched roof over the porch.

If, and when, we found Xander... I’d have to go back to my family, to my parents. I’d have to find Clare and Sasha refuge. I knew without a shadow of a doubt that Adrian was looking for the man who had assaulted Clare and fathered Sasha, and as I sat on the porch, drinking my coffee with milk, I began to wonder why she hadn’t mentioned Hale at all during our conversation.

He was the Alpha, and Sasha was his niece. Wouldn’t he have done something about it?

A sinking feeling crept over me as I pulled my robe around me and slouched into the rocking chair. Mist wafted off my mug of coffee, and I sipped it carefully as I gazed blankly at the bare trees in the distance.

Clare hadn't told her family the real story—not her father, not Hale, not the older brother who passed away.

The whispers about her I'd heard in the village and at the market suddenly made so much sense. She was wearing a mark on her, bright and bold for the whole world to see. She was a princess, the daughter of the late Alpha, and sister to the new one. And, she'd held her chin up high while the rumors swirled around her. I'd heard her be called a slut, a w***e, all kinds of terrible names. Before I knew the truth, I had actually believed those names held weight.

"You're an awful person, Lena," I whispered into my coffee.

My chest was tight with nerves as I rocked, and rocked, and rocked. I was sick of this, all of it—the magic, the bloodlines. How hard would it have been to be born into a normal family? If my parents had conceived me just a second later, would my soul have ended up halfway across the pack lands, and another soul taken my place?

I closed my eyes and drained the mug, the liquid burning the tip of my tongue, but I didn't care. I had things to do today, normal things—errands and chores. I had lesson plans for the next week to write, and I needed to study the curriculum and materials I'd be using to help teach my kindergarteners to read.

I realized in that moment how torn I truly was. Despite everything, I couldn't let go of who I really was, who I'd always be deep down. I'd forever carry the responsibility of my birthright, of my lineage. I couldn't hide from it. I shouldn't hide from it.

Xander had been right.

I rose from the rocking chair once my fingers began to tingle with cold. The rain was coming down in earnest now, pelting the roof with fervor as the clouds darkened and swirled overhead. I dressed warm, but was in need of a new sweater, and some new socks. I'd been planning to spend the day in the village doing some shopping.

But I also had two letters to mail.

Once I was dressed, I grabbed an umbrella and tucked the letters in my bag and headed out, walking the distance from my cottage on the outskirts of the village to the center of town. I glanced through the rain at the castle situated high on a mountain bluff, its many windows grayed and bleak in the downpour.

Maybe I should go up there? I did want to talk to Clare again. I wanted to see Sasha, too.

The postman gave me a once over, nodding his head at the thick wool sweater I was wearing over a pure silk turtleneck undershirt I'd purchased at a shop in town. He smiled softly, his wispy gray hair trembling as he said, "My wife made that sweater. Took her days."

"She did?" I replied warmly, running my fingers over the wool, which was soft to the touch and designed with colorful, multicolored stripes and swirls. It was incredibly loud compared to the muted neutrals I normally wore, but everyone in Cedar Hollow dressed in sweaters. I figured my class would love this, too. It was playful, childlike, and had every color of the rainbow. "I love this sweater so much," I said, and I meant it.

The postman smiled as I handed him my two letters. He glanced at the addresses, then back up at me. He slid one down on the counter, a letter to Abigail, and held the one I was sending to Oliver into the light.

“You’re sending this to the Palace of Poldesse?”

I shrugged, forcing a blush to erupt over my cheeks. “Fan mail,” I lied. “My students drew one of the princes a picture, and I promised I’d mail it.”

That was enough for the postman, and hopefully enough for the letter to make it through to Oliver. The return address was to the school, and my alias, Ms. Grayleigh, was hopefully enough to tip Oliver off as to who it could really be from—at least I hoped.

Abigail’s letter had a return address to my cottage, however. She was the only one besides Adrian who knew I was here.

I dropped a few coins on the counter to pay for the postage and took my leave, shaking out my wet umbrella under the covered entrance of the post office before opening it and stepping out onto the cobblestone street. There were no cars here. There were no phones, either. It was as remote as possible.

With my errands complete, I turned toward home, but the castle caught my eye once more.

I had nothing else to do but sweep the floors of the cottage and maybe run myself a bath. I reached up and tucked a lock of my hair behind my ear, which was far easier now than when it was short, and made my way to the castle.

I was panting by the time I made it up to the castle. There was a road, which was mud soaked and sunken in spots, but it may have been an easier trek than the stone staircase that zigzagged up the side of the bluff. I cursed aloud as I leaned forward, resting my hands on my knees to catch my breath before walking through the front garden toward the front doors. How did Clare and Sasha make this journey every day during the week for school? No wonder Sasha could climb trees better than the first and second graders.

I looked up as the front doors opened and an elderly woman stepped outside, squinting in the rain. I straightened up, coughing and choking as I fought for breath before giving her a short wave and shaking the rain from my umbrella and closing it as I walked toward her.

The front doors were the grandest part of the castle. They were huge and made of rich, solid dark wood. Stained glass took up most of the door, an intricate design that depicted an amber wolf standing amongst the redwood trees visible when the doors were fully shut.

The castle itself was rather plain, however—made of dark stone, and built like a box, not a curve or terrace in sight.

“Can I help you?” the woman asked.

I nodded, gulping before I opened my mouth to reply that I was here to see Clare, but Hale stepped out around the woman, patting her gently on the shoulder.

"It's alright, Mulva. This is Sasha's teacher, Lena. Could you have Reginald put on some tea?"

I was thankful for the heat blaring from the fireplace in the library, which was small and cozy compared to the libraries in the Palace of Poldesse and the Castle Drogomor. I was drying off next to the hearth when Hale handed me a cup of tea, a soft smile on his handsome face.

"I'm not Adrian's wife," I blurted, unable to stop myself.

His cheeks colored, but he nodded his head and looked somewhat relieved.

"I didn't think you were," he said with a little laugh as he poured himself a cup of tea from an ornate kettle sitting on the tray on the table between us. "He's a bit abrasive. I didn't think that was your-uh-type."

I blushed, then felt a wave of guilt wash over me. I liked Hale. He was handsome, of course. But he was also incredibly kind and soft-spoken. He was the exact opposite of Xander in terms of personality, and if I was being honest, I liked that. I liked it a lot.

I had no reason to feel guilty, right? Xander took off on me anyway. At least, I was trying to convince myself of that, even if all the evidence we had pointed in an entirely different direction. I looked into Hale's eyes, which were creased with pleasure just by my being there in his company.

"Stay where you are!" The memory of Xander's voice the night before drifted through my mind as Hale tilted his head, looking me over.

Well, I was staying. And who was here?

Hale.

"I like your sweater," he said, and he meant it.

"Thank you. I thought the kids would like it."

"They will; I know it. You're a good teacher, you know. Clare even said so, and she rarely says anything nice about anyone."

"The two of you are total opposites," I said with a little laugh.

He raised his brows, looking down into his tea as he nodded. "Yeah, well. She's been through a lot."

I waited for him to go on, hoping he'd say something about Clare and Sasha and that he knew the truth, but he didn't. He shrugged a shoulder, setting his teacup down on the tray.

"Do you want a tour?"

"I do," I replied. "Is Clare home?"

"She took Sasha to a playdate," he said, extending a hand to help me rise from the couch.

I hadn't needed his help, but the gesture had been exceedingly kind. His hand was warm in mine, lightly calloused and strong as he gripped my fingers for a fraction of a moment. A jolt of what I could only describe as desire raced through me, blurred by guilt. I let go of his hand and cleared my throat.

"Come on, I'll show you around," he said playfully with a wink.

What was wrong with me? Why was my heart racing?

"Stay where you are," came the memory of Xander's voice again, sending a prickle of despair over my skin.

I am. I am staying.

But where are you? Why aren't you here? Will I ever see you again?

And if I don't see you again?

Hale opened the door to the hallway and offered me his arm. I laid my hand in the crook of his elbow as he led me out of the room.

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 576

Lena

Hale's tour of the castle was totally innocent, and as I wandered the halls alongside him, the guilt that tied my stomach in a knot began to lessen. He showed me every room and told little stories along the way.

He'd been born and raised within these walls along with his older brother and Clare. Their father never truly recovered after their mother's death, and the last years of Hale's childhood had been dark and lonely.

He walked me back into the library where a lunch service was waiting for us, and I sat down across from him in front of the hearth while he dished out sandwiches, fruit, and cups of tea.

"Clare should have been Alpha," he said as he sat down, bringing the tea to his lips before adding, "She was made for it, you know. She has the personality for it. But she's the youngest by two minutes, so... it didn't work out that way."

"She would make quite the formidable Alpha," I said with a knowing smile as I sipped my tea, and Hale nodded in agreement.

His eyes were shadowed, however, and I knew he was about to tell me what I already knew, at least, the side of the story Clare had told her family.

"She was really young when she had Sasha—too young. Sasha has been such a blessing to our family, though. I... I love her. I mean, you know her—"

"Sasha is nothing but light." I smiled, tears welling in the corner of my eyes.

He nodded, chuckling a bit as his own eyes watered. He sighed, clearing his throat as he leaned back against his couch.

“So, uh,” he began, reaching up to wipe a tear from his cheek as he attempted to change the subject. “Who is Adrian to you? You said he left for a while?”

A week ago, I would have lied. I would have spun some story, maybe even telling Hale Adrian was my cousin or a friend from college. But as I sat within the walls of the castle of Cedar Hollow, I felt an overwhelming desire to accept who I was, and to be proud of it. Clare’s situation, her strength, had changed something within me. I leaned forward, exhaling as I met his eye.

“Adrian is my mate’s Beta,” I said. “And he left to find someone who—”

“You’re mated to an Alpha?”

I nodded, wincing a bit at the note of shock in his voice. He leaned forward, suspicion lining his gentle features. At the moment he looked like the Alpha he was and not a shy, quiet man harboring an unrequited crush.

“What are you doing here, then? Did he reject you—”

“He may have,” I replied quickly, cutting him off. I sipped my tea to wet the abrupt dryness in my mouth and set the teacup down on the tray, preparing to explain everything.

“But his Beta—”

“No one has seen Xander... Alpha King Alexander—”

“Alpha King?” Hale stood, confusion and fire igniting behind his eyes.

I ground my teeth as I nodded, then slowly rose from my couch, extending my hands out in surrender. “Let me explain—”

“Alpha King of what? Are you... you can’t be mated to Alpha King Eugene of—”

“Eugene,” I said with a short laugh, “is my grandfather on my mother’s side.”

The truth hit him like a rogue wave, washing over him and leaving him drenched. His eyes went wide as he attempted to take a step backward, but he hit the couch.

“You’re—”

“Princess Selene of Valoria,” I said, extending a hand for him to shake. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Hale looked as though he was about to faint, but maintained his composure as I watched the color drain and then slowly return to his face. I took the deepest breath possible as I met his eye, and then I told him everything.

Never in my life had I told my story so fully and all at once. Hale listened intently, his eyes not once leaving mine. I realized that Hale and I had something in common, the only reason he was willing to listen and empathize with me while I spoke, weaving together the story of when, of what, and of why.

This young generation of leaders, of royals, were modern in a way even our parents couldn’t have predicted. Gone were the days of breeders and arranged marriages—for now, anyway. Gone were days of mailing letters and taking months long journeys by boat to reach the nearest cities. Peace reigned in

the pack lands for the first time in centuries, and we were the generation that was tasked to see it forward.

But we were educated, worldly, and bored. Often times, we were born into roles we didn't want, but didn't have the option of saying no.

Hale, an Alpha because his father and brother had died, was a twenty-one year old leader of his people, tasked with the care and keeping of his pack. He hadn't had the opportunity to live any other way or experience anything outside of his pack like other people our age.

We shared this crushing responsibility.

I told him about Xander, and what I knew about Crimson Creek. I told him how Xander and Adrian had alluded to war on the horizon but were keeping me in the dark. I told him about how Xander had either left on his accord or was in trouble, and that Adrian was here to find him because of our bond. I told him how I was hiding from everyone.

When I finished my story, the sun was beginning to set. The lunch tray was full, untouched. And Hale simply blinked, and nodded, turning on his heel to leave the library with haste.

"When Adrian returns," he said over his shoulder, "have him come to me, immediately."

And then he was gone.

A week passed with no word from Adrian. I had no idea where he'd gone, and had no way of contacting him. I went to work. I ran errands. I borrowed some books from the public library in the village, and I waited, and waited, and waited.

When Saturday rolled around once more, I took my usual perch on the front porch to watch the rain patter on the gravel road outside the front gate of the garden. I watched the villagers walk by, sometimes dressed in thick sweaters and raincoats and sometimes in their wolf forms. I watched, and waited, and watched some more.

But then I saw her, walking briskly toward the cabin, her damp red hair sticking to her raincoat as she hurried toward the cottage. I stood up from the rocking chair, nearly knocking it over as I darted off the porch and down the steps to the front garden.

I met her at the gate.

"Abi," I whispered as she pushed the gate open.

She was dragging a suitcase behind her, and her cheeks were pink with chill and exertion.

"You need to tell me everything," she panted, then threw her arms around me in a tight embrace.

"Well, based on your letter, it sounds like you're starting to believe Adrian is right in that Xander is in trouble," Abigail said as she stretched her legs out on the couch. She sniffed her tea, then reached for the sugar bowl on the coffee table, putting three sugar cubes into the steaming, rose-colored liquid.

"I want to believe it. I know that sounds awful, but I want to believe he didn't just abandon and reject me. After what Clare felt, or saw, however her powers of sight work... I just can't shake the feeling he's in trouble."

I'd spent the last two hours filling Abigail in on the situation. I was shocked that she was here, but happy about it. It wasn't something I'd asked for, but it was something I realized I desperately needed. If I was going to finally shed the fake life I'd been trying to live for the entirety of my adulthood, well, there was no one else I wanted by my side.

"Did he go back to his realm?"

"Adrian says no, he did not."

"How come you can't use your powers to find him?" she asked, arching one of her crimson brows at me. "You know, I don't even know what all you can do, Lena."

"I don't know what all I can do," I murmured, slouching into my armchair.

She waited for me to continue, and I sighed as I swirled my tea in the mug, watching bits of undissolved sugar dance at the bottom of the cup. I told her what I knew I was capable of. I could make plants grow. I could Dream Dance. I had healing blood.

But the light that came from within me, the fire... I had no idea what it was or how to control it. I also hadn't used my powers of sight in years and wouldn't even know how to begin.

Abigail nodded her head as I spoke. She was neither surprised nor impressed, and I was thankful she didn't gawk over my unearthly powers.

"Well, no wonder you're a botanist!"

I gave her a look, then sipped my tea.

"I don't know what to do, Abi. What am I supposed to do? Go home to my parents? Go to Winter Forest and just... wait for him?"

Abi looked thoughtful, then sighed, shaking her head.

"You wouldn't be going to Winter Forest, not now—"

"Why?"

"You know, your letter got me just in time. I was leaving for Breles only a few hours before the post came to the florist shop in Avondale. I figured that before I left for Cedar Hollow, I could spend a day in Breles interviewing for some jobs around town. But when I got there.... Lena, the Royal Navy is there in full, all of the ships. There were warriors all over Breles."

I ran my tongue along my lower lip as I met her eye.

"Adrian won't tell me anything, Abi. He says it's Xander's—"

"f**k Xander! Are we at war? And if so, with what? It was a mix of warriors from all over the pack lands."

I huffed a breath, anxiety creeping over my skin.

"I think I need to go home," I breathed, but Abi shook her head slowly from side to side.

"I don't think you could get home," she pressed, leaning forward. "That's how bad things are getting. We need answers. Where the hell is Adrian?"

The way she said Adrian's name sent a surge of shock through me. I looked at her, noticing the lines of concern drawn in the creases of her eyes.

"Where is he?" she repeated.

"He said he'd be back soon. I don't know when, but it's been a week."

She breathed shallowly, her nostrils flaring as she sank back against the couch.

"We're safe here, Lena. I think you should stay until you know where Xander is. I'll stay with you, and we'll figure this out. I wish I had news about your family, but I left the palace when you did. I think Charlie is in Breles with the navy, but—"

"They'll be fine," I breathed, closing my eyes.

The conversation died, and my mind was reeling as I laid my head against the back of the armchair.

Curse you, Xander, I thought. Curse you for not telling me the truth about what was going on. I knew this had something to do with Crimson Creek. It had to.

"Has Adrian said anything about...." Abi trailed off, her cheeks going rosy as she lowered her gaze and cleared her throat.

I arched my brow at her. "About what?"

"About me," she said sheepishly, shrugging as she gave me a sad smile.

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 577

Xander

I was in Hell. That was the only way to describe this place. Henry walked in front of me as we made our way down a narrow path etched into the side of the violently spiked mountain toward the darkened cave that I had seen from the mountain's peak. It was dry here and absolutely freezing. Henry was dressed in what looked like a cape he'd stitched together with a variety of garments, rags, and dried leaves.

"The second the sun rises, you're gone. Do you understand?" he said beneath his breath. He hadn't even turned to look at me; he kept his eyes forward as we both clung to the fragile shale mountain face and crept closer to the cave's opening. I was bursting with questions for him, but also with fear. The screeching sound... Goddess, the wail of it ate away at my bones.

"What's making that noise?" I hissed.

Henry shushed me firmly, shaking his head. The cave was only yards away, and as soon as I'd reached the threshold, I felt a burst of warm air trickling out from inside.

But it was pitch black. Henry disappeared into the darkness with no light to guide him. I followed the sound of his breathing into the shadows, feeling along the wall as we descended into its depths and turned corner after corner. Eventually, the tunnel began to lighten, an amber glow in the distance gradually illuminating the walls of the cavern.

A warming fire sat in the center of a wide, shallow room of sorts. There was no other entrance or exit except the one from which we had entered the cave. I looked around as Henry shuffled forward. I had to bend my head to fit inside and immediately felt claustrophobic. I noticed the mirrors then, which were no more than cracked shards of glass, propped up on rock shelves along the walls of the cavern. I turned to look into the tunnel and noticed the glass continued, likely all the way to the entrance of the cave itself.

"They glow in the dark; otherwise, it's hard to see them," Henry said gruffly as he broke a few pieces of gray wood into pieces and stoked the fire.

"See what, exactly?"

"You know what," he replied in a low growl. I ran my tongue along my lower lip, glancing at the area. There was a bed made of nothing more than a pile of dried leaves with a tattered blanket laid over it. A few glass bottles littered the area, as well as an oil lantern and a shovel. He'd hung a shirt on a spike on the wall, the shirt itself nothing more than shredded fabric.

"Where are we?"

"Do you really want to know?" Henry asked, sitting back with his legs crossed as he watched the fire, poking it with a stick.

"Of course, I do," I ground out, crouching by the fire. Muted screeching drifted through the tunnel and I turned my head toward the sound, chills running up my spine. "What the hell is that?"

"I don't know," he gruffed. "I've never stayed out at night long enough to see one."

"Is this where you've been the entire time?" I pressed, sitting back on my ass with my arms crossed over my chest. The fire was large enough to send ripples of warmth into my chilled bones. I felt a pang of hunger for the first time in what felt like days, and looked around the room for any signs of food, but there were none.

"Yes, but not always here, in this place. I've been here for about a week."

"Where did you spend the last several weeks, then?"

He looked up at me, his eyes twinkling in the fire. He choked a laugh and shook his head.

"Time has no consequence between this realm of death and the realm of the pack lands, Xander. Or are you going by your true name now?"

I narrowed my eyes at him.

"Don't look so surprised," he continued before I interjected. "I took one look at you and knew exactly who, and what, you were. You came to the pack lands looking for a White Queen, didn't you?"

“How do you know all of this?”

“I’ve been around.” That was all he said.

A sinking feeling settled in my gut as I watched him gaze into the fire for a moment before reaching for a burlap sack and fishing around inside of it. He tossed me a chunk of dry, stale bread. I nodded my thanks as I broke off a chunk of it and popped it into my mouth.

I nearly broke my teeth on it and tucked the bite into my cheek to soften it instead.

“How did you get here?” I asked after several minutes of silence.

“I went after Elaine. She went to the opening looking for Ben and me.... She was gone. I was too late.”

“Gone where?”

“Here, this place,” he waved a hand around the cave and shrugged. “This realm of blood and fury—”

“What did you just say?” I looked up at him, my skin burning with adrenaline, but he didn’t hear me over his chewing of the stale bread.

“Bad things happen to women here. Especially those like Elaine.”

“What do you mean? What happened to her? What happened after you came here?”

“Did Gideon explain everything to you?”

I nodded, “So did Ben.”

“Ah, see. I knew what Elaine saw was an illusion. That’s how he gets them... the girls. He tricks them with images he sends through the barrier between the realms and lures them in. And if he can’t lure them, he sends his cronies to do his dirty work. Jen wasn’t always what she was in the end. She was one of those girls who was turned, and then made to do his bidding.”

“He, as in—”

“The king of this realm, yes.” Henry leaned forward, his face dancing with shadows cast by the flames.

“He’s looking for Lena. He’s starting a war over her. He’ll destroy the pack lands and kill everyone, Xander, until she’s turned over to him.”

“Why?”

“She’s the only one who can give him what he wants,” he said casually, as if we were having this conversation over beers at the local pub instead of hiding in a cave while whatever creature from the deepest level of Hell stalked us outside. “He’s been looking for her for ages. He found her. He likely knows where she is because of the blood root—”

“What?” I choked on a piece of bread, swallowing it painfully. “What are you talking about—”

“It was the only way to save her, to save you both. It gives off a smell. These beings can track it. It started centuries ago, when the first of their kind came through the barrier between the realms to settle in what is now Crimson Creek. It was after a war in this realm, from what I understand, between the

former king and the current king. Those followers of the former king crossed the barrier instead of facing death, and their offspring eventually became what they are now.”

“What does he want with Lena?”

“The same thing you want with her,” Henry replied, his tone dropping an octave as he gave me a harsh, unforgiving look of disapproval. I nodded once, biting the inside of my cheek as I peered at him through my lashes.

f**k, really?

“I didn’t come to her realm to take her away and use her as a breeder, I’ll have you know—”

“Ah, but wasn’t that the original plan? Don’t play me for a fool, boy. Your powers are written all over your face—”

“You don’t know me,” I sneered. “I don’t have powers—”

“Not the way that she does, no. Your powers can’t be controlled. They’re just a part of who you are. You suck the life out of people just like your uncle did. Just like all the men in your line, going back to the time when Lycaon bestowed his final gift upon his followers before he gave in to mortal death. Gifted with their own realm, can you believe it? Not even Morrighan possessed such powers. But that gift of a new realm, where his followers could worship him without the threat of the followers of the Goddess and the White Queen warring with them came with a cost, did it not? You, Xander, a descendant of Lycaon himself. You inherited the curse bestowed upon him by his own mother after his treachery—that darkness. That shadow that follows you, sucking the life out of those you love.... That’s him, is it not? The only piece of him you carry is the curse—”

“How do you know all of this?”

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I nearly broke my teeth on it and tucked the bite into my cheek to soften it instead.

“How did you get here?” I asked after several minutes of silence.

“I went after Eloine. She went to the opening looking for Ben and me.... She was gone. I was too late.”

“Gone where?”

“Here, this place,” he waved a hand around the cove and shrugged. “This realm of blood and fury—”

“What did you just say?” I looked up at him, my skin burning with adrenaline, but he didn’t hear me over his chewing of the stale bread.

“Bad things happen to women here. Especially those like Eloine.”

“What do you mean? What happened to her? What happened after you came here?”

“Did Gideon explain everything to you?”

I nodded, “So did Ben.”

“Ah, see. I knew what Eloine saw was an illusion. That’s how he gets them... the girls. He tricks them with images he sends through the barrier between the realms and lures them in. And if he can’t lure them, he sends his cronies to do his dirty work. Jen wasn’t always what she was in the end. She was one of those girls who was turned, and then made to do his bidding.”

“He, as in—”

“The king of this realm, yes.” Henry leaned forward, his face dancing with shadows cast by the flames. “He’s looking for Leno. He’s starting to work over her. He’ll destroy the pocket lands and kill everyone, Xander, until she’s turned over to him.”

“Why?”

“She’s the only one who can give him what he wants,” he said casually, as if we were having this conversation over beers at the local pub instead of hiding in a cove while whatever creature from the deepest level of Hell stalked us outside. “He’s been looking for her for ages. He found her. He likely knows where she is because of the blood root—”

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and the White Queen worrying with them come with a cost, did it not? You, Xander, a descendant of Lycoon himself. You inherited the curse bestowed upon him by his own mother after his treachery—that darkness. That shadow that follows you, sucking the life out of those you love.... That's him, is it not? The only piece of him you carry is the curse—"

"I don't have that effect on people—"

"But you think that you do, and that shred of doubt in your mind is the reason you came to her realm to take her as your wife, your Luna, the vessel for your offspring—"

"I love her," I interrupted, trying not to yell the words. "And she loves me. We carry each other's marks, and she is my mate—"

"And you will watch her realm burn to the ground, Xander. You did nothing to stop her from sticking her nose in everyone's business in Crimson Creek. You didn't leave when I told you to. I told you the very day you arrived to get the hell out of there and never come back, yet you stayed. And when Lena arrived.... Goddess, seeing her for the first time, I couldn't believe it. I knew right then that we were all f****d. Do you hear me? Absolutely f****d. Dead. I knew Maxwell Radcliffe had been fishing for fresh women to bring to his property to feed to the king in order to stay in his good graces."

Henry sighed, running a hand over his face before continuing, "I've lived in Crimson Creek for over thirty years, Xander. I had no idea what it was for the first ten years I lived there. But my wife, my mate... she desperately wanted to leave. When Bethany was born—"

"Bethany?" I furrowed my brow, unsure I heard him correctly.

"Our daughter," he said in a choked whisper, closing his eyes against her name. "She was... different. It was the blood root that had me asking those first questions. I could never stomach the stuff, but everyone ate it and drank it and mixed it into medicine. Bethany nearly wasted away for the first three days of her life. She was dying. But, a little blood root mixed into a bottle and, well..."

The pieces were falling into place. All except one.

"Bethany told me she doesn't remember her life before coming to the Radcliffe Estate. Why is that?"

Henry looked so incredibly sad for a fraction of a second. I watched his eyes glimmer with tears, which he quickly wiped away before replying, "I had to do it. We hid her for years. I didn't understand what it meant that my wife and I had been able to conceive a child together. Me, a shifter, a wolf, and my wife... Bethany was twenty when one of those hybrid monsters broke into our home just outside the estate. I shielded Bethany, but it took my wife. I never saw her again. Maxwell made me an offer that I couldn't turn down. Maxwell had told the king that we'd produced a child, but he'd said that the child had died in infancy. I hadn't known that at the time, but I'd been a loyal employee of the estate for decades. Maxwell was willing to protect Bethany if I did... if I did his bidding. So I agreed, and Maxwell took her memories somehow, and moved us onto the estate."

"And what did he make you do in return?" I asked through gritted teeth, my blood heating within my veins.

Henry looked me in the eye, grinding his teeth as he spoke the words that cut me to the bone.

"I think it's time you heard the story of Carly Maddox."

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 578

Lena

Abigail moved into the second bedroom in the cottage. A full day had passed since her arrival, and I woke up Sunday morning feeling like an absolute fool.

I'd run away from everything, and now my home, my lands, and my people were on the brink of war. I was the Moon Goddess, for Goddess' sake.... Right? What kind of ruler could I one day be if I was this much of a coward?

I laid in bed with my arms outstretched well into late morning. Rain pattered against the window panes, and across the hallway I heard Abigail snoring. I was in no hurry to get up, because I knew what I needed to do once my toes hit the chilled floorboards.

The letters I'd written to Abigail and Oliver had been vague. Abigail's letter was just a brief synopsis of my new life, what I'd been up to, and where she could find me. I hadn't expected her to show up, but given the circumstances, it sounded like she had nowhere else to go.

And Oliver's letter? It had just been an apology. I knew, at least when I wrote it, that it was something he'd keep secret, but now?

I wouldn't be surprised if my parents were making their way north to come find me. Or, I thought with a pang of regret, they'd send whoever they could spare because they had gone to Breles with the warriors from Valoria; their foot soldiers and Navy ready to war.

"Xander," I breathed, closing my eyes against his name. "Why didn't you tell me the truth?"

Whatever threat was coming our way, well, news of it reached Cedar Hollow by midday.

Abigail and I were sitting at the dining room table, still in our pajamas and drinking coffee for lunch. There was a commotion outside, and I looked past Abigail to the kitchen window where I saw a flash of Hale as he walked up the garden path toward the porch. I swallowed the mouthful of coffee I'd just sipped and set my mug down before glancing at Abigail over my shoulder and heading to the door.

His fist was raised to knock when I swung open the door, and my heart dropped into my stomach.

"Adrian? Is he home?"

"No," I said with regret, noticing the dark circles under Hale's eyes. "He's not here."

"The second you see him again, send him to me. Do you understand?"

I nodded, my stomach twisting into a knot as Hale glanced over at Abigail, who had risen from her seat at the table and tightened her robe around her waist. He stared at her for a moment longer before his eyes met mine again.

“Is it possible for you to get in touch with your parents?” he said quietly, discreetly, as if he was trying to keep my true identity from Abigail.

“She knows who I am,” I replied, tilting my head toward Abigail. “And yeah, I could write them. I know there’s not a landline in the village—”

“There’s a satellite phone at the castle. Come up this afternoon, okay? It’s urgent.”

“You’ve been asked to send warriors south to Breles, haven’t you?” Abigail chimed in, her whiskey voice thick with concern.

Hale’s eyes didn’t leave mine, however.

“What are we up against, Lena? The Alpha King of Findali was vague. I’m making an announcement in the village in a few minutes. I need to know.”

“I don’t know, Hale. Xander didn’t tell me what was really going on. Adrian... he’d know.”

“But he didn’t tell you?”

“Xander forced him not to. He won’t defy his Alpha.”

Hale nodded, looking grave. “Fine. If Adrian shows up—”

“I’ll send him to you.”

Hale glanced at Abigail once more before turning on his heel and walking away in a hurry.

“That kid is the Alpha?” Abigail said with a shocked laugh. “What is he, sixteen?”

“He’s twenty-one,” I replied as I shut the door. I stood there for a moment, pressing my weight into the wood and closing my eyes. “Where the f**k is Adrian?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard you say f**k before,” she chuckled. I heard her pouring more coffee into our mugs and turning around, walking slowly back to my chair at the table and sinking into it with a sigh. “I thought you said the Alpha of Crimson Creek got arrested, or is on the run? What exactly happened? Like, I just don’t understand why both the Alpha Kings of the East and West would be sending forces to Breles over an Alpha with such a small territory.”

“I don’t think this has anything to do with the Alpha of Crimson Creek,” I said into my coffee mug. I was trying not to tremble as I lowered it back to the table without taking a sip. “This is something else. Something bigger.”

“More moonstones and evil Dream Dancers?” she teased.

I glared, but my mood had lightened a fraction as I looked into those green eyes. She was trying to cheer me up.

“I’m happy you’re here,” I said with a somber smile.

She smiled back, then tilted her head toward the letters I’d set on the table earlier in the day. “When are you sending those out?”

“Later today,” I breathed, then shrugged. “But I might not need to if I can get my parents on the phone and find out what’s really going on.”

“Well, I’ll go with you up to the castle. I’m curious about this baby Alpha—”

“He’s not a baby,” I laughed, but I felt my cheeks burning a bit as Abigail studied my face.

“Do you have a little crush?”

“I’m going to go take a nap,” I replied, rising from my chair and turning away from her before my cheeks could color any further in her presence.

I lay in bed for the rest of the afternoon. I hadn’t even thought about walking down to the village for Hale’s announcement. I was sure I’d hear about it the next day at school from the other teachers. I pressed my face against my pillow as I thought about my students. I knew three of them for sure had parents who were warriors for Hale. One little boy in particular would have both his mother and father sent away.

I wanted to scream. I clutched my pillow with both hands and opened my mouth against the fabric, crying out as quietly as possible. I let myself break down. I let my powers, fueled by my emotions, rush through me. For the first time, I let myself really feel them coursing through my body.

I recognized the familiar warm, prickling sparks that settled in my fingertips. I recognized the way my blood heated and set my skin on fire as it searched for any injury that needed tending. I turned my head toward the wall and saw the sprouts of vines that began to creep through the paneling, sprouting into yellow flowers and filling the room with the scent of honeysuckle.

But then I felt something new, something unfamiliar. A shadow embraced me, folding itself over my body and weighing me down. It was... sheltering me.

My mark pulsated, a brief sting just to let me know it was still there. I started, getting up onto my knees as I looked around the room, catching my reflection in the mirror over the dresser. I saw it clear as day; a blanket of darkness encompassing me. The weight of it calmed my nerves, holding me like a lover.

I realized this new power was something Xander had given me. How to use it? I didn’t know. I’d seen this shadow around him only once, and no one else had seemed to even sense its presence. Had he known he’d given it to me?

A wave of fatigue hit me like a train so abruptly that I had no choice but to flop back down on the bed. I closed my eyes, taking the deepest breath I’d taken in days as sleep crept up my legs and belly, the shadow of night and starlight warming me into a comfortable slumber.

But then I opened my eyes to the sunset. Crimson light poured in through the window as I sat up and looked around. I jumped as the front door slammed below me.

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"LENA!" Adrian's voice shook the cottage, and I nearly fell out of bed in my haste to get up.

I heard Abigail's voice ring out, lifted in concern. But Adrian's heavy footsteps were on the stairs, and before I could even reach the door he'd thrown it open, his face reddened and his hair disheveled.

"Hale needs to see you—"

He dropped a huge book on the bed, smelling of mildew and decaying with age. It was ancient, the oldest thing I've ever seen, older than even the book of the White Queens in Winter Forest.

"f**k Hale," he spat, then pointed to the book. "Do you know what that is?"

"No—"

His eyes were wild as he pulled his lips over his teeth, baring them at me. He looked as though he was about to shift.

"What the hell is wrong with you!?" I cried as he stalked toward me and took me by the shoulders, shaking me violently.

"What did you do to him?"

"Get off me!"

"Adrian!" Abigail shrieked, and Adrian abruptly let go of me, a strange calm rushing over his face.

He turned to face Abigail, who was standing pale-faced in the doorway, one of her hands clutching his forearm. He looked back at me, swallowing hard before he motioned toward the book.

"I didn't know there were two copies of this book—"

"Where have you been?" I hissed, rubbing my aching shoulders.

"Everywhere. I didn't find anyone matching Clare's description of the man who assaulted her and got her pregnant. I think she's lying. I think she was leading me to this," he pointed to the book, losing some of his calm. "There's one in Egoren, in the Temple of Lycaon. He wrote it, according to legend."

"What—" I stammered, trying to wrap my mind around what he was saying.

"I doubt anyone in this realm knows how to read it. It's in Lycaonic script. I can read it. I've read it before; it was required to learn his teachings in school. I... You did something to him. You— You did something to him, just like it said you would!"

"What the f**k are you talking about?" Abigail cried, tears welling in her eyes.

I looked down at the book, my fingers prickling with my power as I reached toward it, unable to stop myself. The second I touched it I heard muffled, muted voices drift up from the pages, like a dozen people talking at once. I took my fingers away, folding them into my palm as though I'd been stung, then met Adrian's gaze.

"What are you saying?"

"Did you kill him?" he asked, pain echoing through his voice.

"Of course not!"

"Are you sure?"

I opened my mouth to reply, but couldn't even utter the words no.

"You've done this before," he said as he took a step toward me, effectively closing the distance between us.

He was talking about my mother. But, she hadn't disappeared. She'd just... slept, stuck in a dream. Stuck somewhere between our realm, and somewhere else.

I was hit by a sudden realization that nearly knocked me to the ground. I gripped Adrian for support as I closed my eyes, willing my mind to take me where I needed to go.

To the garden... to the garden... Take me there. Take me—

A scream pierced the air outside the cabin, frantic and full of agony. Adrian grabbed me, holding me to him as he reached for Abigail. I'd been so close to the place I'd created, that pocket of solitude before he'd ripped me away, back to reality.

More screams rang out, and Abigail jumped, clutching Adrian's shirt. I heard a screech, so shrill it shook the glass in the window panes.

"Find him," Adrian breathed, his voice a barely audible whisper. "We're out of time."

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 579

Xander

Henry slept, but I couldn't sleep through the screeching that was funneling through the cave's entrance. I hugged my knees and waited, and waited, and waited for Henry to wake up and explain to me what the hell was going on.

The story of what happened to Carly ran through my mind on replay, twisting my stomach into a knot. I'd tell Lena, of course, when I saw her again. I pushed the imagery out of my mind, praying to whoever was listening that I'd have a moment's peace and rest.

But there was no time to dwell, because when he did wake, I was quickly ushered back through the entrance of the tunnel without so much as a word. Pinkish light reflected off the shards of glass he'd propped along the tunnel, showing us the first glimpses of day.

“Days are short here,” he said in a muttered whisper, urging me to keep walking forward. “You don’t have much time.”

“What—”

“Go. Go back to the portal you came out of and get out of here. Do not return.”

I tried to explain to him the situation I was in, how Lena had trapped me and the realm I’d come from was nothing more than the product of her mind, but he wouldn’t hear any of it.

We reached the entrance of the cave and I gaped over the sweeping, mountain landscape. It was barren—not a tree or scrub in sight. Rocky bluffs rose from the ground beneath us as he pushed me toward the outcrop of scale we’d come down on the night before.

“Come with me,” was all I could say, but he shook his head.

“I need to find Elaine. I’m getting close.”

Before I could reply, he gave me enough of a push that I had no choice but to step onto the scale and hold on to the mountain’s side to maintain my balance, or risk falling hundreds of feet to my death.

He was gone, retreating back into the cave without saying goodbye.

“f**k!” I cried out, filled to the brim with frustration. I climbed back to the peak, an arduous journey that took me nearly an hour and left me coated with shale fragments and sweat. In the light of day I couldn’t see the swirling mass that had been above my head the night before, but I could feel the energy of it radiating down on me as I reached the mountain’s peak.

What was I supposed to do? Jump as high as I could with my arms outstretched? I rolled my eyes and ran my hand over my face.

I jumped, and nothing happened. I raised my arms over my head and grabbed at the air. Nothing.

“What the f**k am I supposed to do?” I cursed, ruffling my hair with my hands in frustration.

But then a scream ripped through the air above my head. I paused, listening to the whispers of chaos that were beginning to swirl around me, embracing me.

“Hello?” I called out, and was answered by terrified voices and the sound of crunching gravel. “Hello!”

Suddenly, I was hit with a force I don’t have the words to describe. I was being pulled through suffocating blackness, the mark on my shoulder burning so painfully I cried out, screaming into the void. Lena’s face filled my mind. She was running, a child clutched to her chest as she stumbled and shielded the girl from something coming up behind them.

Then I hit the ground, flat on my back, the air knocked from my lungs and vision going dark.

Lena

Fire and noise blanketed us as I followed Adrian through the forest on the outskirts of the village. We were trying to get to the bus station, praying there was a bus, or at least a vehicle of some kind that could get us out of the village. It had been Adrian's idea to flee, and he was frantic as we moved like ghosts through the dense woods, the three of us crouching in the overgrowth whenever someone passed.

All around us people were running, some in their human forms carrying children and some as wolves, guarding the families trying to escape the village. I looked up through the trees at the bluff where the castle had once stood.

It had gone up in flames less than an hour ago and now shown like a beckon of amber light among the darkness of the forest below.

The last hour was a blur. We'd walked out of the cottage and stood in shock in the front garden as fire burst through the trees, igniting the village in the distance. For a moment, the flames looked to be nothing but a vivid, violent sunset creeping through the forest, but then dusk fell and cast Cedar Hollow in chaos and bloodshed.

I saw the first creature before we'd fled the cottage; tall and gray with molted skin. It was naked, half wolf and half... something else, the same creature I'd killed in the barren hills outside of the Radcliffe Estate weeks ago.

No. No, no, no—

"Lena! Hurry up!" Adrian screamed as he reached for me, snapping my vision forward.

I'd been looking over my shoulder at the flames licking the redwood trees at the outskirts of the village as we continued to run toward the bus station, which was situated along the highway that ran from Cedar Hollow all the way to Breles, branching off from territory to territory as it made its way south. We were only a few hours from Red Lakes, and my stomach tightened as I thought of my Aunt Kacidra and Uncle Pete and their children.

Were the same creatures in Red Lakes? What about elsewhere? Avondale? Mirage?

Winter Forest?

I gasped as I tripped, knocking the wind out of myself. My ankle snapped, and I screeched as Adrian freed me from a root that arched out of the ground along the forest floor. Abigail was crying, tears staining her cheeks as they grabbed me by the shoulders and hoisted me to my feet.

"We need to get to—"

"There's nowhere to go, Adrian!" I cried, pain radiating up my leg. I could feel my powers knitting my broken ankle back together, but not fast enough. I could barely stand upright.

Screams ripped through the forest, followed by frantic cries for help. People rushed past us in droves, the entire population of the village running for whatever safety they could find.

"What's happening?" Abigail pleaded, shaking Adrian's arm.

He wrapped an arm around her shoulder and pulled her into him, whispering something to her as she sobbed into his chest. His eyes were fixed on something over the top of her head, those blue orbs glimmering like raw sapphires in the firelight.

I saw it then as I watched him embrace her. The pain in his eyes was severe, and the look of pure agony on his face cut me to the core.

“Abigail,” I whispered, reaching for her as I took a cautious step.

Adrian slowly turned to look at me, his eyes full of emotion. “Get her out of here,” he said to me, his voice catching in his throat and cracking with heartbreak.

“Adrian—” Abigail pleaded, but in an instant he was gone, his clothes shredded in a pile only a foot from us, his golden wolf body gleaming in the firelight as he sprinted toward town.

“How long have you known?” I said hastily as I urged her to walk with me, to move.

She swallowed hard, choking a bit on the smoke that began to encircle us. The whole forest was burning now, and I could feel the heat penetrating my clothing.

“When he came to Avondale looking for Xander,” she whispered, knitting her hand in mine. “I— I just found him, Lena. I can’t lose him now—”

“We need to get out of here,” I breathed, shuttering as the smoke filled my nostrils and made me lightheaded. “Go, come on. He’s going to be fine. We need to hide—”

Something crashed into us, knocking us both flat. Abigail screamed as we were dragged apart by whatever had landed on us. I was flat on my stomach, something large pressing me down into the ground. A wolf ran past us, unfamiliar, and tackled the creature dragging Abigail by the ankles into the darkness. The animal snarled and yelped, letting go of Abigail long enough for her to crawl forward, reaching for me.

“GO!” I screamed, but she shook her head, her eyes wide with terror as they left my face and slowly looked up at whatever was on top of me, crushing me with its weight.

I dug my fingers into the ground and cried out, screaming at Abigail to run. The trees around us creaked and swayed, and Abigail looked skyward as one of the redwoods splintered down its center and began to fall.

“ABIGAIL!” I screamed in frustration.

She gasped a word, but it was drowned out by the tree snapping and cracking as it fell over the top of us.

In a flash of gold, Abigail was gone. It was Adrian, thank Goddess. He’d come back for her in time to witness what I’d done, and why.

I braced myself with my hands crossed over my head to shield my neck and skull as the tree fell, showering me in bark and twigs and branches. The creature pinning me to the ground took the brunt of the impact, squealing and screeching in pain as the tree’s splintered pieces pierced its skin.

It let me go with enough time for me to roll to the side, and I opened my eyes as another tree fell, smashing into the creature with enough force to send a shockwave through the forest.

The creature twitched, its clawed fingers splaying then going still. It was dead.

I jumped to my feet, panting as I whirled around. Behind me a battle was taking place, wolves versus the creatures, and between them, people continued to run for safety. I looked down at my hands, my heart rate skyrocketing as I tightened them into fists.

My powers. I'd used my powers to save Abigail's life, and my own.

And I'd use them to save the people of Cedar Hollow.

I didn't hesitate. I raised my hands into the air and screamed, pulling the full force of the heat and light coursing through my body and sending it forward through my hands. A silver burst of light fanned out over the area, and I stumbled backward and gasped as dozens of silver wolves made of light and mist rushed forward into the forest, leaving trails of starlight behind them. Confused shouts and yelps of surprise echoed through the forest as the silver light faded from view. But then the sounds of chaos erupted, and through the darkness I saw sprays of silver rushing through the forest, taking out creature after creature.

I felt dizzy. I couldn't breathe. I placed a hand over my chest as I staggered, tripping over another root and falling onto my bottom.

My power waned, fizzling out as my vision blurred for a moment. My ears were ringing and my head ached and throbbed. I reached up and pressed my hand over one ear and pulled it away, blood staining my palm.

"Ms. Grayleigh?" came a small, terrified voice nearby.

I shot up, looking around through the darkness and dying fire. Sasha was standing only yards away, trembling so violently her teeth were chattering.

"Oh, my Goddess, Sasha," I cried, running toward her and gathering her in my arms.

Her clothes were tarnished and covered in soot, and she was barefoot, her feet bloody and bruised. She started to sob, and I patted her back, looking around as a hush fell over the forest.

"Where's your mom?" I whispered, a blanket of dread embracing me.

It was too quiet. Even the flames licking the trees seemed to sizzle. Sasha shrugged, hiccuping as she hid her face in my shoulder.

I needed to get her out of here. I needed to—

There was a cracking sound, like lightning, and then something large fell from the trees in the distance. Against the fire I could see something writhing on the ground, a body, and then the breath caught in my throat.

"What the f**k!" Xander cried in pain, turning over onto his side, facing me. His eyes opened wide, the amber flakes in his nearly black irises illuminated by the firelight.

“X-Xander!” I cried out, and began walking, running toward him, but then...

I didn't scream as my shoulders were penetrated by what felt like several knives, curling and locking themselves beneath my skin. I dropped Sasha, unable to move my arms. Xander was on his feet, running toward us, his face contorted in panic.

“Get her out of here,” I whispered, tears streaming down my cheeks as I locked my eyes on his. And then, everything went black.