

## **Kings Breeder 601**

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 601

Chapter 101 The Mat Bond Returns

\*Lena\*

Everything was, in fact, on display as I walked through the corridor leading to the dining room with two ugly vampire guards trailing behind me. I knew they could see my ass fully, but I choked back the crippling embarrassment as I walked with my chin jutting toward the ceiling. Thankfully a thick shred of fabric hid the apex of my thighs, but that was all the modesty I'd been allowed. My breasts, which were huge and heavy because of my pregnancy, were barely covered by the black lace that hung loose over them, a long V of bare skin starting at my neck and going all the way to my belly button.

Penny had brushed and styled my hair, pinning it off of my face. She'd put makeup on me, dark shades of black, wine, and navy. The dark colors made me look especially pale, but maybe that was in style. I wouldn't know, however. I hadn't seen another woman in the castle other than Penny.

I didn't wait for the guards to step in front of me to open the great double doors leading into the dining hall. I threw them open myself, using all of the strength I had to complete the task. They bounced against the stone walls in the corridor and sent a thundering echo through the castle, announcing my arrival.

Nikolas was sitting with his boots propped up on the table, a goblet of blood, or wine, in one of his hands.

"Spectacular," he breathed, his voice laced with seduction.

I scowled, refusing to bow as I slid into my seat at the far end of the table.

I didn't touch the food that appeared in front of me. I held Nikolas's gaze, barely blinking. He was watching me with the same intensity, his violent, crimson-ringed eyes searching mine for glimpses of power... or weakness. It could have been both.

"What do you want now?" I asked, forcing myself to sound annoyed, and somewhat bored.

He arched his brows. "You're not what I expected you to be—"

"You already said that," I interrupted, folding my hands in my lap. Beneath the table, my hands grazed the faint swell between my hips that I'd only noticed a few hours earlier, before going to the library. I didn't have much time to play games.

He seemed entertained by my tone, and maybe a bit turned on, which sent a shiver of apprehension down my spine. It was likely no one had challenged him like this before, at least not someone like me—someone lowly, a peasant in comparison to his rank, at least in this realm.

"What did you do today, my queen?" he drawled, crossing his foot over the other ankle.

"I went to the library—"

"And did you find it to your liking?"

“It’s rather dark—”

“No one has been in there in centuries. Perhaps we can find you a new outlet for amusement—”

“But, I met your librarian. He was dusting the shelves.”

Nikolas furrowed his brow, giving me a confused smile.

“I don’t have a librarian.”

“He was an old man,” I said sharply as another shiver ran down my spine.

“What was his name?”

“He said he... he said he didn’t remember.”

“Hmm...” Nikolas leaned forward, eyeing me with interest. “Tell me, have you seen a single old man in this realm? In this castle?”

“No, I—”

“Maybe you’ve seen a ghost?” he snickered, turning his gaze to the guards lining the walls of the dining hall, who snickered in return.

I paled, licking my lips as I settled back against my seat. Had I? I swear.... No. I was sure he was real.

“Are you going to eat?”

“No,” I said, pushing the plate away with force. My mind was moving at a rapid pace as I tried to get myself under control again.

“Then we’ll get on with it.”

He rose from his chair and pushed it to the side, stepping out into a wide, clear area on the other side of the dining hall. I followed, but stood a good distance away from him. He motioned to two of the guards, who disappeared through a doorway and came back with a man, the same feeder I had healed only a few days prior. He looked pale, very unwell, his eyes glossed over and mouth drooping as they dropped him on the ground and pulled him onto his knees.

“Use your powers to kill him, now,” Nikolas demanded, shifting his weight as he motioned towards the man. The man looked half dead already, and was likely completely unaware of what was happening.

“No,” I replied, meeting Nikolas’s eye.

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want to.”

He pursed his lips. The usual dark seduction behind his eyes flickered into something new—annoyance, frustration.

“I command you as your king—”

“You are not my king,” I yawned, crossing my arms over my chest. “Anyway, that’s child’s play.”

“Child’s play?” he scoffed, turning his back to the man to face me fully. “Death is the greatest power of all—”

“If you’re weak,” I retorted, noticing the flames growing behind his eyes. Yes. Yes! I was getting a rise out of him. “Giving life is the real power. Death is inevitable.”

“Then show me something else,” he ground out, his canine teeth sharpening into fangs.

I steadied myself, refusing to flinch.

“What would you like to see?” I began, tucking my hands behind my back and walking in a slow circle. “Shall I heal him again? Shall I give him immortality?”

“He’s already immortal—”

“But that’s not entirely true, is it? These lower vampires... they die, just like my kind. Their lives are long but limited. You are the only true immortal, and you’re alone. And you’ll remain alone, while everyone else perishes.”

“What game are you playing?”

“You sought me out. I’m only telling you the truth.”

“What truth is that?”

“That I have the power to transform your kind, Nikolas. I can give your chosen few real immortality. You can rule them, not having to continue enslaving each new generation and repeatedly bend them to your will. Isn’t that what you want? You think producing a true blood heir will cement your position, your legacy, your legend. No. It’s your ability to be a true god.”

I was speaking in riddles on purpose, playing to his thirst for absolute, undying power. I’d been thinking about how to do so since the day I was first brought before him, since I realized his power was nothing but greed and fear. He was desperate for recognition. If I offered him something new, something he thought he had control over....

“I can build you a new realm, Nikolas.”

He blinked in surprise. “You can?”

“I’ve done it before, and can do it again. There, you will be the god—the only god.”

I didn’t know how to actually do it. I could open portals, sure, but that was still a mystery to me. I’d built my garden realm as a child before I knew how I was even using my powers, and I never found out why I’d been able to do so.

But I could access that garden. I could trap him there like I’d accidentally trapped Xander. I could burn him with the sun and let that voice drive him insane until he was begging for death.

“Take my hands,” I said softly, seductively, but he hesitated.

“Not now,” he breathed, looking suspicious. He turned on his heel, glancing at me over his shoulder before he left the room, slamming the door behind him.

I lingered in the dining hall for a few moments before leaving myself, and beelined for my room. I locked the door behind me, ripping the ribbon of silk from my skin and pulling a nightgown over my head. I rushed to the bathroom, yanking the book out from behind the toilet.

But then I stopped, panting, as I held the book in my hands.

“He was real,” I whispered to myself. “I know he was real.”

I walked back into the bedroom and pulled on the cloak I’d been wearing earlier and walked out of my bedroom, hiding the book beneath my cloak. I went to the library, closing the door firmly behind me as the darkness washed over me.

It was pitch black—not a candle in sight.

“Hello?” I said into the darkness. “I need to talk to you!”

There was no sound from the darkness, no movement. I pulled the book from beneath my cloak and opened it, letting little sparks of my power shoot out from my fingertips and illuminate the text.

“He said you were a ghost,” I said into the dark. “But you gave me this book. I need to know why!”

From deep within the pit below me, something moved.

“Are you there?” I breathed, my words catching in my throat as footsteps echoed in the deepest recesses of the pit, barely audible.

“Your mate is here. I’d leave this place, now, if I were you. Abandon your mission, Goddess. It’s suicide.”

“Who are you?”

A long sigh rippled through the dark, and I felt movement beside me, and beneath me, all around. But it was the old man’s voice who spoke to me; a whisper that caressed my skin.

“I’ve been waiting for you for millenia. You must deliver that book to the Great Witch, and then the twentieth White Queen.”

“The twentieth?” I said, my voice laced with confusion. “I don’t understand—”

“I don’t have time to explain. Do what you must to leave this castle, now. He’s here, your mate. He brings allies. Take the girl with you, she will be useful.”

“Who?” I whispered, my skin beginning to crawl as a soft breeze ruffled my night dress.

“Your maid. I never meant for this realm to be like this.”

Suddenly the breeze disappeared, and the old man’s words faded into the pit. My stomach was tied in a knot as I backed toward the door, fighting for the doorknob.

I backed into the hallway but didn’t have a chance to turn around before someone grabbed me from behind, their nails digging into my skin.

“You smell... wonderful...” came a gravely, lifted voice. I turned my head and caught a glimpse of gray, molted skin.

Before I could scream, I felt a faint tug on that thread that bound me to Xander. I reached for it, gripping it tightly and pulling with all my might.

I'm here! I screamed through the bond.

Muffled voices echoed through the corridors from some squirmish taking place a floor below us. The guard had his lips against my neck, but then pulled back, his head turned to look down the corridor as the noise grew closer.

I swung the book as hard as I could and knocked him in the head with it, sending him staggering to the ground. I was sprinting in an instant to my room, my feet bare on the cold stone tiles.

"Penny!" I hissed in a forceful whisper.

She was standing at the doorway to my bedroom, wide-eyed and frightened. "What's happening?"

"We need to go, now!" I grabbed her by the shoulders and pulled her into the room, locking the door behind me and throwing the book on the bed as I began to rifle through the belongings I'd hidden in a hole in the mattress. My hand wrapped around the sunstone, and I pulled it out, holding it up to the faint flicker of a candle burning on the side of my bed.

"You're coming with me," I said, not waiting for her to answer as I grabbed the book and then her arm, dragging her toward the door.

But the door swung open, knocking up both backward.

"Going somewhere?" asked King Nikolas.

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 602

Chapter 102 : Escape the Castle

\*Lena\*

I clutched Penny to my chest and released the full force of my powers of light. I prayed that the burst of sun and heat hadn't wounded her. I heard the Vampire King scream, his voice so shrill it made the entire castle tremble.

I opened my eyes, my breath catching in my throat as I pushed Penny away, holding her at arm's length to check her for injury. But then I felt it, that dark embrace, that blackened net only one person could cast.

I turned toward the doorway just as the Vampire King struggled to his feet, his skin reddened and blistered, some places black with burns. He held up his hands to his face, inspecting the damage with wide eyes.

His eyes turned to me, blazing with fury.

I held out my hand to send my powers forth again but felt them falter, weakened. I didn't let my face show my panic, but the act of raising my hand to him had been enough. He staggered out of the doorway, his expressions washed with pain.

I screamed Xander's name through the bond as I clutched the book and sunstone in one arm and an entirely confused Penny in the other.

"Come on," I whispered, pulling her along as we stepped into the corridor.

The blackened, ashen bodies of the King's guards were scattered throughout the corridor, smoking with heat. I blinked, my chest tightening as I looked down at the c\*\*\*\*\*e I had caused. I'd killed these... things. They were more demon than person, but still. I'd killed them. My hands were red with their blood.

This wasn't what I wanted to be, but what choice did I have?

"Come," I said sternly, tugging on Penny's arm as we stepped over the bodies and made our way down the corridor. "How do we get out of here?"

"There's a door, and a drawbridge. It's a few levels below."

"Show me the way," I whispered, unsure of how far my powers had reached. How many more guards were coming our way? I needed to find Xander. We all needed to get out of here, and we needed to do it immediately.

Penny was whimpering behind me as we ran through the windowless castle, cloaks dusting the ground in our wake. We reached a sharp corner and a steep set of stone stairs, and Penny pointed frantically downward.

Behind us, voices rang out, followed by growling. All the downy hair on my body stood on end as the sound of snapping jaws echoed through the corridor behind us. I knew that sound—hybrids, maybe many of them.

"Go!" I cried, practically pushing Penny down the stairs as we stumbled, running down the steps into darkness.

I continued to call out to Xander through our bond, but nothing came in response. It was silent, shockingly so for how near he must have been if he was able to cloak Penny and me in his shadow.

We reached the bottom of the stairwell and turned into a narrow corridor filled with what looked like the servants of the castle rushing about, all lower vampires in varying states of distress.

"Get out!" I cried. "All of you, run! Get out of the castle!"

Several of them looked at me, wide eyed and frantic as they sucked in their breath. Penny clutched my arm as she said, "Free—you're free, if you can run. Please—"

A thundering screech filled the castle, and we all cowered, covering our ears. I hadn't even fully risen before everyone in the corridor began pushing and shoving in one direction, which was where Penny was directing me to go.

We fled through an inconspicuous wooden door, a tangle of bodies and noise as servants spilled out behind us, some crawling on all fours as they tried to escape the fray.

Xander was a blur of movement as he pushed through a barricade of guards, and to my absolute shock, a flash of red filled my vision as Oliver leaped over several guards, his wolf body gleaming in the moonlight drifting through the open doors to the drawbridge.

"Xander!" I cried, but his wolf was busy tearing a group of guards to shreds.

Servants were spilling out onto the drawbridge, running as fast as they could into the darkened landscape beyond the castle.

Penny screeched beside me as a tall, handsome lower vampire walked up to us, taking Penny by the arm and pulling her away from me. I shoved him hard, my free hand extended to scratch him on the face.

"I'm with Xander," he hissed. "We need to go, now!"

The chaos behind us was fading, but above our heads the castle was still echoing with noise.

"We need to get across the bridge. Hurry!" the vampire said sharply.

I looked back at Xander and Oliver, who had taken out at least two dozen of the guards, and watched as Xander shifted back his human form and ripped the clothes off a vampire and began to put them on, Oliver following suit.

Xander met my eye and gave me a wry, boyish grin.

Thank the Goddess.

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None of us spoke of what happened before we'd traveled far enough away from the castle that it was no longer in sight. Zeke, the vampire male who had escorted us out of the castle, had ushered us into a narrow cave, and the men barricaded it closed from the inside with rocks while Penny and I lingered in the back of the cave with only a few candles lighting the area.

Xander, Oliver, and Zeke had to duck to fit inside the cave, and in moments we were all sitting down in a circle, listening to the muted screeching of the winged hybrids as they canvassed the rocky cliffs that sheltered the castle.

It was an ugly kingdom, nothing but endless rock. I sat in silence as morsels of food were passed around, wondering if the enslaved servants of the castle had made it to safety, at least a few of them.

Xander was seated next to me, his hand resting on my leg. I stole a glance at him, feeling an overwhelming sense of comfort as my eyes met his. We had so much to talk about. I had so much to apologize for.

But we were in the company of others.

Oliver was staring at Penny, his brow furrowed deeply as he watched her pick at a piece of bread. Penny looked absolutely terrified and was refusing to meet the eye of anyone but me. Zeke was seated next to her, a little closer than I would have liked.

"Did she kidnap you?" Oliver asked Penny, and I snapped my head in his direction.

“What?” I snapped, but Penny paled, her eyes lifted to mine with a shrug.

“Goddess, Lena. You dragged this poor girl against her will out of that castle?”

“I saved her life,” I growled, and Penny did give a little nod of agreement to that, but kept her mouth shut. “Why the hell are you here, anyway?”

Oliver narrowed his eyes at me, a playful smirk lining his lips. He looked so much like my aunt Maeve, his mother, whenever he was up to something devious.

Xander cleared his throat, casting a quick glance at Zeke before looking at me.

“Oliver believes his mate is in this realm.”

“What? How would—”

“It’s Abigail’s sister,” Oliver quipped, wrapping his arms around his knees.

“Abigail doesn’t have a sister,” I argued, scoffing as I shook my head. “Do you have any idea how dangerous of a position we’re in right now? How dangerous this could be for our home?”

“It’s Elaine,” Xander said quietly.

Gooseflesh rippled over my skin at the sound of her name. I didn’t have the words to convey how I felt. My mind was reeling, and the only thing I could think of was my friends—Abigail, with her dark red hair and green eyes... Elaine, with her hair the same shade, her eyes just a slightly different color, and shape.

I remembered feeling at home with Elaine, like I’d known her for a long, long time. We’d become fast friends, and her stubborn personality had seemed so familiar.

How had I not noticed?

“How?” I stammered, blinking into the candlelight between us.

“She was kidnapped as a child, from what Abigail remembers,” Oliver answered, and my eyes flew to his.

He explained everything that had happened in my absence. Six weeks had passed in our realm, which made my stomach twist as I counted the days I’d spent here, in the realm of night. It had only been a week and a half by my estimation, maybe less. I looked up at Xander.

“We need to go home,” he said, brushing my hair from my face. His eyes were soft, but something was lingering behind them that told me he and I would be having a very uncomfortable conversation the first chance we had some time alone.

“We can’t,” I said quickly, pointing to the book in my lap. The sunstone was tucked safely in the inner pocket of my cloak. “I need to take this somewhere.”

“Why?” Oliver asked.

“I was told to take it to the Great Witch, and then... to the twentieth White Queen. That’s Maeve.” I watched Oliver’s face shadow in confusion, but Zeke, who was sitting next to him, went rigid.



“What significance does the book have that would require it to be delivered to the Great Witch?” he asked sharply.

I tilted my head as I looked at him, noticing how familiar his face and coloring were. He looked like Kiern, and I realized a moment later that he must be her son. He seemed too youthful to be a brother, despite the fact he looked as though he could be as old as Kiern.

“I don’t know, but I was able to... reveal something inside of it. I haven’t had a chance to read it—”

I explained what had happened in the bathroom when the title page had given me a papercut, and everyone listened intently. Penny nodded at several parts of my story, a soft smile touching her mouth as I spoke of how I’d hid it behind the toilet.

“I was wondering about that,” she said, her voice a long sigh.

I looked up at Xander and noticed that stare he was giving to Zeke, who was looking right back at him.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

It was Zeke who spoke next.

“I can take you to the witches,” he said, which must have defied whatever silent conversation was passing between him and Xander. “But, you need to use the sunstone on Penny and me if we’re to aid you in this journey.”

“What? What does it do?” I asked.

To my surprise, Zeke smiled.

### [Chapter 603](#)

#### Chapter 103 : Journey to the Great Witch

\*Lena\*

We stayed in the cave until daybreak. The screeching of the hybrids had ceased, and as Xander and Oliver pulled the rocks that had hidden the entrance to the cave away, I stepped out into the faint, pinkish light that embraced the barren landscape.

Penny and Zeke lingered in the back of the cave, nothing visible but their eyes as I palmed the sunstone in my hands. Xander was stretching, rolling his neck. Oliver too was moving his aching limbs after spending the night tucked in the cramped cave. They noticed my sightless gaze and turned to me.

I glanced down at the sunstone in my palm, running my thumb over its raw, jagged surface. Then, I raised my hand and threw the sunstone into the ground with enough force to break it into three chunks.

Oliver yelped in surprise, and Xander scowled, his eyes meeting mine in a glare.

“What the hell did you do that for?” he barked as I gathered up the pieces and tucked them into my cloak.

“Zeke and Penny each need to carry a piece with them. It will prevent them from burning in the daylight.”

“Who told you that?” Oliver asked, furrowing his brows.

“Zeke,” I mumbled, sweeping up the thin shards of sunstone that littered the ground and dumping the dust in my pocket. “And I believe him. He can’t escort us to the witches during the day without it, and we’d be up against the king’s guard and hybrids if we travel at night.”

“I know the way to the witches,” Xander said, anger lacing every word. “You could’ve asked me—”

“This isn’t our realm, Xander.”

“We don’t know who to trust—”

“I know who to trust,” I snapped. Oliver raised his brows, looking between me and Xander and then away, rolling his eyes. I ignored him and kept my focus on Xander. “You will let me lead.”

“You’re done, Lena. We’re going home.”

“No, we’re not—”

“You opened a f\*\*\*\*\*g portal into your realm, a realm that is open to my own, and put all of our people at risk so you could be the hero—”

“This isn’t about me being a hero, Xander. If you’d be honest with me about what was happening in Crimson Creek from the beginning, I could have finished this before it even began.”

“Oh? And how would you have done that? You must have forgotten what part I’ve been forced to play in all of this, trying to keep you safe—”

“I didn’t ask that of you!” I cried, my hands clenched into fists. “I never asked that of you. I asked you to be honest with me—”

“You, of all people, want to talk about honesty?” Xander stepped toward me, his dark eyes flaming with rage. “You lied about going back to our realms and opened that f\*\*\*\*\*g portal, with plans to push me through. You led the king right for us and then left me to die, Lena.”

“Well, you’re obviously NOT dead—”

“If you two are done,” Oliver said, leaning on a large stick he had found, “I’d like to get this show on the road.”

Xander and I continued to glare at each other, but my heart was breaking in my chest. He looked as though he truly, wholly, hated me.

Maybe he was right to. I had tricked him. I’d lied. I’d failed and put him in an impossibly dangerous position. Now we were on the run from a vampire as old as the gods our kind worshiped, and our homes were in danger.

“I have to finish this, Xander,” I said with finality.

He just walked away.

Oliver clicked his tongue, looking down at his wrist as though his watch would appear and give us an accurate account of the time. “Can we get going?”

I turned on my heel and walked back into the cave, slipping Penny and Zeke a piece of the sunstone. Zeke tucked his in his pocket, then turned to Penny, taking the gem fragment from her hand and tucking it into the pocket of her cloak. She looked up at him, her face etched with fear. But Zeke smiled down at her, his expression totally gentle.

“We’re going to be fine, I promise,” he said, extending a hand to her.

She took it, but he had to practically drag her out of the cave and into the light of day. I held my breath as I waited for them to erupt into flames or start billowing smoke, but nothing happened.

Penny let out a surprised gasp, and Zeke chuckled, the two of them still holding hands.

“Well, now that that’s squared away, let’s go. We’re burning daylight,” Oliver quipped as he motioned toward the steep descent Xender had already started walking down. I swallowed back my anger and followed.

We walked for hours, through the entire day. When we reached the bluff overlooking the great sea edged by the well of mist, Oliver stopped me. Xender, Zeke, and Penny continued down the bluff, leaving us alone.

“Cut him some slack. He’s done nothing but try to find you. We haven’t slept in days.”

“What if I didn’t want to be found?” I asked weakly, watching Xender’s form grow more and more distant as it mingled with the muted starlight as the day turned to a rich, violet dusk.

Oliver’s eyes were searching my face for understanding, but I refused to meet his eye.

I walked in front of Oliver down the bluff, watching as Zeke and Xender reached the water’s edge. They were standing next to each other, talking as Zeke pointed toward the well of mist. I hadn’t noticed the way light shimmered through the mist until my trek down the bluff. At first, I thought it was just an illusion, but the closer I came to the water’s edge, the more I noticed the little specks of light that danced in an unusual pattern against the mist—orb of light, like at my garden.

I shifted the weight of the heavy book in my arms as I walked up beside Zeke and Xender. Penny was a little ways down the beach, looking around in awe as the sunset spilled over the smooth, round rocks that rolled in with the waves.

“Where to now?” I asked, directing this to Zeke instead of Xender.

“Through the mist,” he said, pointing the thumb toward it with a shrug.

“How? Swim?”

“No, you... you’ll need to call us a ride.”

I squinted at Zeke as the sunset played over his face.

“I don’t understand.”

“Use your powers, Lene. Place your hands in the water and send it toward the mist.” Xender didn’t look at me as he spoke, and his voice was totally void of emotion.

Oliver was standing with his arms crossed, watching the exchange.

"I fell right out of the sky, right there," he said, pointing over the water.

Xander, Zeke, and I turned and looked at him, but no one spoke. He shrugged and walked off, his hands tucked in his pockets as he closed in on where Penny was currently throwing rocks into the sea. I watched her for a moment, wondering if she'd ever seen the sea before.

I handed Xander the book, and he met my eye for the first time since we left the cave. There was guilt and pain behind his eyes, but also a furious streak of stubbornness that I'd seen only once, the day he'd broken up with me at the train station, so long ago now.

I knelt on the rocks and placed my hands in the water. It was cold, and it reminded me of the beach in Winter Forest with its silt and ice-filled water.

I took a deep breath, but just as I was about to send a ripple of light from my hands, Xander made an odd, confused noise in his throat behind me. I turned to look at him and noticed the cover of the book had begun to glow, so faint that at first that I thought it was only the reflection of the sunset on the leather.

A great trembling washed over the beach, then ceased. The gentle waves breaking over the beach stilled, and the sea turned as gentle and lazy as a pond.

"What's happening?" I asked, rising to my feet.

Oliver and Penny were looking out over the water, and I followed their gaze.

The well of mist contracted in on itself, then fell apart in a shower of light. The sunset was too bright to see what was beyond the well of mist, but it didn't matter, not now. Through the remnants of the fading mist came a boat, moving soundlessly through the still water without leaving so much as a wake.

She took it, but he had to practically drag her out of the cave and into the light of day. I held my breath as I waited for them to erupt into flames or start billowing smoke, but nothing happened.

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I handed Xander the book, and he met my eye for the first time since we left the cave. There was guilt and pain behind his eyes, but also a furious streak of stubbornness that I'd seen only once, the day he'd broken up with me at the train station, so long ago now.

I knelt on the rocks and placed my hands in the water. It was cold, and it reminded me of the beach in Winter Forest with its silt and ice-filled water.

I took a deep breath, but just as I was about to send a ripple of light from my hands, Xander made an odd, confused noise in his throat behind me. I turned to look at him and noticed the cover of the book had begun to glow, so faint that at first that I thought it was only the reflection of the sunset on the leather.

A great trembling washed over the beach, then ceased. The gentle waves breaking over the beach stilled, and the sea turned as gentle and lazy as a pond.

"What's happening?" I asked, rising to my feet.

Oliver and Penny were looking out over the water, and I followed their gaze.

The wall of mist contracted in on itself, then fell apart in a shower of light. The sunset was too bright to see what was beyond the wall of mist, but it didn't matter, not now. Through the remnants of the fading mist came a boat, moving soundlessly through the still water without leaving so much as a wake.

A hooded figure stood at the front of the boat, its face shrouded in a shadow.

Xander nearly dropped the book. I grabbed it from him, noticing the heat seeping through the leather. I turned back around, watching the boat coming closer, and closer, and closer, until the figure finally came into view.

It was a woman, tall and beautiful. Her face was blank, with no expression etched into the curve of her lips or behind her piercing gray eyes.

She was looking right at me, unblinking, as the boat reached the shore.

"I'm looking for the Great Witch," I said shakily. "I have something I'm supposed to give to her."

"We know," she said in reply, her ageless voice ringing in my ears like an echo. She turned her gaze to the group of us, lingering on the vampires. "Sunstones? I didn't think there were any left."

Zeke stiffened, and I saw Penny clutch Oliver's arm. The woman slowly turned her gaze back to me, then past me, at Xander.

"A dark lord? Are you Lycaon's son?"

Xander didn't say a word as he met the woman's eyes. She didn't go on, and instead extended her hand, motioning for me to come aboard.

"We all go," Xander commanded, and the woman's eyes shot to him.

She seemed to snap out of whatever haze she was in prior, and for the first time, her face showed an unreadable emotion.

"You're not welcome—"

"She isn't going by herself," he said sharply, and for the first time since we'd reunited once again, I was on his side.

"Fine," the woman said, glancing down at the book in my hands. "Come."

Xander stepped past me, boarding first. Zeke waited for Oliver and Penny to join us before he helped Penny into the boat, followed by himself, then Oliver.

I was last, and I lingered on the beach for a moment. I hesitated, uncertainty rippling through my body as the woman's eyes held my gaze.

There was a little flicker inside of me, in my belly, something I'd never felt before. The shock of it must have shown on my face, because Xander had started to climb back out of the boat before the woman said, "Come, Goddess. There is much you need to know."

Xander halted his progress, his eyes meeting mine. Through the bond I felt him, his voice embracing me. He said he'd keep me safe, both of us.

“Xander,” I said quickly, tucking the book under one arm and grabbing his arm with my free hand. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry—”

He reached up and cupped my cheek, taking what looked like the first deep breath he’d taken in ages. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine, and I want to get out of here as much as you do. I swear. I thought I could do it—kill him, you know. I really thought I could put an end to all of this.”

“I know. I’m sorry for doubting you.”

I choked on a sob as he pulled me into his chest and embraced me, his hand cupping the back of my head as he held me against him. He pulled away, his brow furrowed as he reached between us and placed a hand on the swell of my belly.

“This wasn’t here before,” he said in a low, concerned whisper. “It’s only been a few days since I saw you last.”

“I’m getting rounder by the minute,” I said, thinking it was some cute joke all pregnant people told their partners, but the look in Xander’s eyes made me think otherwise. “What? What’s wrong?”

“Time moves exceedingly fast here, Lena. I think, maybe, your pregnancy is too—”

“Are you coming?” said the woman.

Xander squeezed my hand, his eyes telling me we were fine. Everything was going to be fine.

I climbed into the boat, Xander following, and we moved away from the shore as the last hint of day dipped below the horizon, taking us with it.

## [Chapter 604](#)

### Chapter 104 : The Coven of the Great Witch

\*Lena\*

Xander watched me wearily from the other side of the boat as I clutched the book to my chest. Behind us, the Realm of the Night faded from view as the wall of mist returned, closing us inside some new, unfamiliar place.

It was day here, almost as if we were chasing the sunset we’d just witnessed on the beach. In front of us laid a wide, distant shore sparkling like a polished emerald.

I had a moment of déjà vu as the boat crept toward the shore. I’d been here before, at least I thought I had, during that nightmare when I was sick and fevered from Jen’s attack, of which I still bore the scars. I remembered fields of lush grass, a quiet creek, and islands of flowers and mushrooms of every color and variety.

But it was the women from that dream I remembered the most. They had been dressed in silken white gowns that trailed behind them as they walked, their hair combed and brushed away from their elegant faces.

And then there had been their leader, a woman with rich, wine-red hair. She'd told me I had unfinished business with the "Alpha," and as we approached the shore, I realized she had meant Xander.

I locked eyes with Xander as the boat stopped just before the water's edge. I sent all of the conflicting emotions I currently felt down the bond, hoping that he'd decipher the apology I was desperate to give him but couldn't put into words. He held my gaze, then abruptly looked away as several people fanned out over the grass-covered shoreline.

"Why so many?" came a lifted, soprano voice that could have belonged to a child. One of the white-clad women stepped forward, her beautiful face twisted in confusion.

The woman in the boat rose to her full height and folded her arms over her chest, one narrow brow arched. "The answer wasn't clear to me at the time—"

Zeke leaped from the boat, water splashing over his knees as he made his way toward the shore. Some of the women who had gathered hissed and shrieked as he pulled himself up onto the grass, sopping wet with wild, glowing eyes. "Ianthe?" he barked, to which one of the women rolled her eyes and jabbed a thumb into a dense thicket of healthy willow trees, where the first inklings of a settlement were visible through the drooping branches.

"We're to let a vampire into our home?" came another female voice, which was followed by several cries of protest.

"Not one, but two," the woman on the boat said kindly, extending her hand toward Penny, who had gone pale and rigid from the attention as all their eyes turned on her.

Oliver was up next, but he disembarked the boat in a less graceful fashion than Zeke had only moments before. His shoe caught on the edge and he fell face-first into the water, gasping and coughing violently when he finally resurfaced and crawled up onto the shore. He shook himself off like a dog on all fours and shot the group of female onlookers a dirty look as they tittered and batted their eyelashes at him.

One of the women stepped forward, motioning toward Penny.

"Come, vampire girl. We won't bite," she cooed, but Penny hesitated, especially as giggles rang out from the group of women on the shore.

"You'll be fine," I coaxed, locking eyes with Penny as she gingerly rose to her feet and allowed the woman on the boat to help her down into the knee-deep water.

It was just Xander and me, and the woman. She looked at us expectantly, then rolled her eyes as she lowered herself into the water.

"Metes," she mumbled, and I colored as Xander shot her a narrow-eyed look of disapproval. She only smirked, and continued, "Not all rainbows are butterflies, is it? Your kind puts such heavy expectations on their couples."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Xander growled.

"Xander!" I hissed, shushing him.



He glared at me for a moment, then rose to his feet and extended a hand for me, helping us both down into the water.

While the water was knee-deep on Xander, Zeke, and Oliver, it was nearly shoulder deep on me. I almost went completely under, but Xander grasped me by the elbow and pulled me to shore, the book held high above my head.

Penny was shivering only a few feet from the shoreline, surrounded by women who were poking and prodding her, fussing over her wet clothes and asking her very forward questions about her status as a vampire. Poor Penny looked terrified, but the women weren't being mean, at least from what I heard from their muffled conversation.

Xander gave me a once-over, slowly, as though he hadn't gotten a good look at me since we'd fled the castle. I realized painfully that he might not have, and as the group of spectators and our friends moved into the forest of willows, we were left on the shore, alone.

The last time we'd been alone was when I led him into the trap I'd set for the Vampire King—the trap that had failed.

"Is this a really stupid idea?" I blurted. Xander's mouth twitched into a fleeting smile.

"Yes, but what else were we supposed to do? Our friends just walked away."

I ran my tongue along the inside of my lower lip, considering the situation.

"You can just blast them all away with your powers," he suggested, somewhat sarcastically, "or we can hear them out, and learn a little more about this book."

"Maybe they'll feed us," I breathed wistfully, my stomach tightening at the thought.

"Maybe we can rest somewhere for a moment, we all need it."

We stood in silence for a moment, watching the water break gently against the shore of this strange, unfamiliar place.

Xander knitted his fingers in mine as we turned to follow her into the unknown.

"I'd carry the book for you but it... stung me."

"It's fine; it's not that heavy." That was a lie, and based on the boyish smirk that played across his face, Xander knew it too. I'd been carrying it around for a full day now, and my arms were aching from the weight of it.

We crossed through the trees and found ourselves in a small village. I held in the gasp that threatened to escape my throat as I looked around, taking in the simplistic splendor. The buildings were made of wood and covered in fragrant, flowering vines. Stone pavers weaved through the village, and lush gardens pouring over with blooming flowers, fruits, and vegetables surrounded each quaint cabin that we passed as we the group deeper into the village.

The buildings had been built around the trees instead of the trees being removed altogether, and as we walked deeper into the forest, I looked up and saw more buildings suspended from the trees as well, several stories off the ground and connected by bridges.

Children ran past us carrying baskets full of the biggest, juiciest berries I'd ever seen. Men and women walked by in vibrantly dyed homespun outfits likely made from plant fiber based on the weave of it.

"Mates," she mumbled, and I colored as Xander shot her a narrow-eyed look of disapproval. She only smirked, and continued, "Not all rainbows and butterflies, is it? Your kind puts such heavy expectations on their couples."

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Children ran past us carrying baskets full of the biggest, juiciest berries I’d ever seen. Men and women walked by in vibrantly dyed homespun outfits likely made from plant fiber based on the weave of it.

Everyone looked happy, healthy, and totally unbothered by our arrival.

“They can’t see you,” said the woman from the boat, turning to look at Xander and me over her shoulder.

“Why not?” I asked, noticing that she was right. No one even looked in our direction.

“Magic,” she teased. “Everything will be answered in a moment. Andromeda is waiting for you.”

“Who?” Xander asked, but the woman turned away and continued to follow the group of women through the village and into a wide, marshy clearing.

I was right. I had been here before, but in a dream. A crystal clear creek ran through the area, breaking the landscape up into little islands connected by bridges made of wide, flat stone. At the far end of the clearing towered a great tree I couldn’t name, so tall I felt as though the top branches could reach the stars. A home of some kind was built in a spiral around the trunk of the tree, its windows reflecting the light of an absolutely gorgeous blue sky and temperate sun.

I noticed Oliver up ahead. He was trying to break from the group and go back to the village, but the white-clad women were preventing him from doing so. Zeke was walking next to Penny, his arm wrapped protectively around her shoulder as he watched the scene unfold.

But my gaze fixed on a woman standing in front of the tree, dressed in a long white gown embroidered with thousands of flowers. Her wine-red hair was loose and billowing over her shoulders, shiny as silk. She smiled widely as we approached.

“So, you brought me my book?” she said as she stepped forward, dipping her head in greeting to Penny, Zeke, and a frantic looking Oliver. Then she turned her gaze to me and Xander, lingering on him for only a second before she turned her full attention to me. She walked forward, then stopped a few feet away from me. She dipped into a low, graceful curtsy, and the rest of the women followed suit; every single one of them bowing as though their king and queen were present.

Penny nearly dropped into a curtsy as well but Zeke prevented her from doing so, and Oliver just looked mildly confused. Xander, on the other hand, was watching them all closely as they began to rise.

“Moon Goddess,” Andromeda said, meeting my eyes.

I almost took a step away from her in shock as I gazed upon her face. Her eyes were a deep violet, flaked with crimson.

“Tell me, how is my brother?”

Another High Vampire.

Xander gripped my arm to steady me as I shoved the book at her. She took it, smiling with relief as she ran her fingertips over the cover.

“Ah, it’s been so long since I’ve seen it. How ever did you find it?”

I blinked, shaking my head as I glanced between her and Xander.

“An old man gave it to me at... when I was in the castle—”

“An old man?” she asked, then laughed heartily, throwing her head back as the sound echoed through the clearing. She wiped a tear of mirth from her cheek as she composed herself. “He always talked about wanting to grow old and withered one day.”

“He—who?”

“My father, of course—the Night God.”

Xander furrowed his brow, and I flushed with confusion. This was all becoming incredibly complicated. She noticed my confusion and smiled, laying her head over my forearm.

“Come, we have much to discuss. Let me introduce you to my coven.”

Chapter 605 : Preparing for War

\*Xander\*

I was f\*\*\*\*\*g exhausted. There was no way around it. Three days had passed, and I didn’t think I’d slept even once. First, Zeke and I had to fill Oliver in on everything that was happening in the Vampire realm, the Realm of Night. Second, Zeke had to lead us to King Nikolas’s castle, which had taken two nights’ worth of a trek. Lastly, I had to convince him to storm the castle with Oliver and me and free not only the enslaved people who lived in the castle, but also Lena.

Now I was laying flat on my back in the grass, trying my hardest to stay awake so I could take in every single word Andromeda, a High Vampire who was also, apparently, a witch, said to Lena.

I just wanted to sleep. I wanted to eat something, and I wanted to sleep, and I wanted to get the hell out of there and go back to Lena’s realm and figure things out from there. That portal she’d created was still open, and based on what Oliver had told us about his experience, it could take you anywhere you wanted as long as the thought was in your mind.

Oliver said he'd just gone for a walk in the hills outside of Gideon's property in Crimson Creek and felt what he was sure was the mate bond. He said it was intense, and his whole body had reacted, and suddenly he was falling through the sky and into the water just outside the misty wall that separated the night realm from wherever the hell we were now. He'd been thinking about his mate, trying to find her, and based on his behavior now, I was willing to bet she lived somewhere in this new realm.

And if his mate was indeed Elaine....

"Narcissa is my sister," Andromeda said as she sat with Lena in the grass only a few feet away. "How is she? I haven't seen her since the fall of the High Vampires."

"She seems happy," Lena said, her voice wavering. "She's very nice."

"Did she bake for you? She was always doing that. She was fascinated by the Lower Vampires when they first came into being. She's always lived with them, you know, acting as though she were one of them. When our father cursed our brothers for their transgressions by allowing the sun into our realm, she chose to go live with the Lower Vampires underground, instead of with... us."

I opened one eye, glancing toward Andromeda as she told what I expected to be a very informative tale about this realm and its history, and what our realms were truly up against if it came to war.

Lena only smiled in response to Andromeda's inquiry. Lena hadn't told me about Narcissa, or that Kiern had taken her before a High Vampire that was hidden deep within Brune to eat cookies and drink tea. I rolled my eyes and shut them again, letting the sun play over my face. But then, they started talking about the book.

"It belonged to Leto, the first Moon Goddess. Before she was a god, she was a healer and wise woman. This was a gift from my father," Andromeda said as she ran her fingers over the leather cover of the giant book, her eyes glazed with the memory. "He was trying to woo her, but she was weary of him. She did take the book and fill it with her recipes for tinctures and potions, and eventually, her spells. That was before my father gave her the powers you now possess, Lena, and before she used those powers to make your realm and rule over her own people."

"She was a witch?"

"Of course; most women are," Andromeda said with a laugh. "That's where your kind's powers come from. Leto was a playful thing. She wasn't interested in the powers of darkness like most gods. She wanted her people to live full, rich lives, which meant keeping them mortal. She used her powers to give them the gift of finding their fated matches, their soulmates. But she faltered when she found her own mate. She begged the gods, our father in particular, for a way to keep the man immortal as well as the twin children she bore. My father loved her, and gave her the moonstone."

Ugh, the moonstone. I already knew the tale. Everyone in the pack lands, as well as Egoren, was familiar with Morrighan and Lycaon.

"What happened to your father?" Lena asked, and Andromeda let out a long, somber sigh.

"He's still around, but we tired him out, I'm afraid. My brothers were always fighting over territory, which turned into fighting over slaves. Narcissa and I were our father's favorites, and when we left our

family's home high in the Night Range, he saw no point in staying to watch his sons kill themselves over what they thought was god-like power. I haven't seen or spoken to him in over a thousand years. But—" she patted the book with a smile, "I knew he'd find a way to send me the book."

"The man in the library... he told me I needed to give it to you, and then bring it to the twentieth White Queen, which is my aunt Maeve."

"Ah, yes. I've heard of Maeve. She's expected to be a formidable force when she unlocks her true powers."

I opened my eyes fully and turned my head to look at them, watching lines of confusion dance across Lena's face.

"But... she's in her early forties. She came into her powers long ago—"

"She's never had a reason to use her powers yet. I heard of the trials from her early adulthood with that woman... what was her name? From the line of Lycaon?"

I narrowed my eyes as Lena explained what she knew about Maeve during the time of Tasia. It had been Lena's mother who'd defeated her, though—Hanna, the Luna Queen of Valoria.

"Your mother is a true witch." Andromeda smiled. "I hope I have the chance to meet her one day."

Lena looked quizzical, but Andromeda didn't allow her a moment to ask any further questions.

"You will need to return to your own realm very soon, I'm afraid. My brother is not going to stop his attack on your realm. There is much to be done to prepare—"

"How do we stop him?" I said, uttering the first words I'd spoken since we arrived in this strange place.

Andromeda looked at me with an air of ease, shrugging a shoulder. "It's going to take a lot more than shooting light out of your fingertips," she teased, turning her gaze to Lena. "But the book will help you. Maeve is the one who it is meant for, however. She will know the truth when she sees it."

"Why not just tell us now?" I pressed, frustration coursing through my veins.

This was all just a long game to these beings. Andromeda, Narcissa, Nikolas... they were playing with us. What else did gods have to do other than torment their subjects?

"Because I don't know," she said a little more sharply than her voice had been before. "This book belongs to your kind, not mine. I don't even know why it's here in this realm, but it's imperative you get this back to its rightful owner, which is Maeve. Nikolas has the ability to cause breaks in the realms—that's one of his powers—but he needs bloodstones to do so. His slaves mine for it night and day, and his armies are already gathering for a full assault now that they've sent their hybrids out into your realm to get the lay of the land. Nikolas must die, and when he does, peace must be restored between the Night realm and the Realm of the Moon—" She turned to Lena, her eyes softening.

"I came here in a dream once, but I thought... you said something about me coming home to the realm of the gods—"

"Oh, my child. This is not the realm of the gods."

“Then what did you mean?”

Andromeda looked thoughtful, but shrugged lightly, rolling her eyes between me and Lena.

“Maybe will we meet again, after the war, and I will know more,” she laughed. “But for now, I only know one thing.”

“And what thing is that?” I asked, growing heated as Lena’s face shadowed with confusion once again.

“That your child, the child you carry, will live a long, normal life, free of prophecy. Powerful, yes, but not bound by curses and the crushing weight of expectation. She will grow to be... content and happy. And she’ll find her mate, as you have found yours. You two, the mates of Shadow and Light, are the endpoint of the great conflict of the gods. Once you prevail, your kind can finally have the peace Leto so desperately wanted for her people.”

I furrowed my brow. Lena opened her mouth, but no words fell from her tongue. I could see fatigue in her eyes, dark circles casting long shadows beneath her bottom lashes.

“She needs to rest,” I grumbled, taking Lena by the arm.

“You’re welcome to use my temple,” Andromeda said with a bob of her head, and in a shower of flower petals and mist, she disappeared.

I yelped with surprise, then felt a rush of heat prickle over my chest and cheeks. “I’m sick of this magic, Lena.”

“I know, I’m ready to go home—”

“We can rest first. We should both rest.” I led her toward the massive tree that had a house wrapped around it, which looked too small to contain more than two or three rooms. I noticed Zeke out of the corner of my eye talking with Ianthe, with Penny standing close beside him. Oliver was trying in vain to explain something to a group of Andromeda’s acolytes, all of them dressed in white silk. No one would miss us if we snuck away for a moment to close our eyes.

I held the door open for Lena, but she stopped in the doorway, her breath hitching in her throat. I looked over the top of her head and gasped as an ornate foyer spread out in front of us, glistening with floral wallpaper and thick, purple carpets.

It was a palace hidden inside the treehouse, some sort of magic trick. I didn’t dwell on it. I led Lena into the palace and opened the first door I could find. A bedroom materialized out of a puff of mist, complete with a four-poster bed and rich, silken coverlets that called out to me. I picked Lena up and carried her into the bedroom, laying her on the bed.

She had her arms wrapped around my neck and didn’t let go as she sunk into the mattress. I looked into her eyes as I brushed a kiss over her mouth, then her forehead, resting my hand on the swell of her stomach.

“It’s going to be alright,” I whispered, and she nodded, a choked sob escaping her throat. I laid beside her for some time, my body wrapped around hers. I closed my eyes, letting sleep take me.

I didn’t dare dream.

I knew when I opened my eyes again, we would be preparing for war.

Chapter 606 : Portal to Home

\*Lena\*

This place, whatever it was, was a land of eternal sunshine. I wondered if I may have dreamt about it at some point during my childhood, and maybe that dream had spurred the creation of my own garden realm.

Everything was too beautiful and too good to be real, and as we gathered in the clearing under the gentle rays of a forgiving sun, I felt a pang of regret at the idea of leaving.

We'd only spent a day here at the most, enough time to rest and eat. Xander and Zeke spent much of the last several hours in quiet conversation, but their eyes told me they were plotting something grandiose, something... violent. I tried to stop myself from thinking of what would need to come next. Next was war, next was c\*\*\*\*e, and even in her seemingly infinite wisdom, Andromeda had little answers for us.

Xander was upset by this and accused her of purposefully talking in riddles. Oliver was too wrapped up in the mate bond he felt in this place to focus on anything, or anyone, who required his attention. But something changed in him as we prepared to leave, and Andromeda noticed the change, although she hadn't spoken a single word to him and left him to her acolytes instead.

"They said there is no one by the name of Elaine here," Oliver said, his voice laced with hurt. Andromeda twisted one of his glossy, copper-blond curls around her finger as she circled him, her wide mouth curving into a smile.

"She was here, but she left. You'll see her again."

"I haven't seen her at all," he said in a whisper, his cheeks coloring as he lowered his eyes. Xander watched him with a careful gaze, then glanced at me, those dark eyes heavy with emotion.

The only thing Oliver had ever wanted was his mate. I'd known that since we were just children. He'd thought that was Hollis, and maybe even for a moment, he'd thought that had been Abigail as well.

He'd followed that bond here, and it had dropped him right at the doorway to the place where Elaine had been, at least for a moment. Now, she was gone.

"People can just come and go?" Xander asked.

Andromeda shook her head, folding her arms over her lap as her acolytes scurried around behind her, readying the book for its journey. They were wrapping it in silk and tucking dried flowers within the folds of fabric.

"Your witch was seeking her friend, and through our seers was able to locate him—"

"She's looking for Henry," Xander said beneath his breath, glancing at Oliver with a quick nod that said, 'We'll talk about this in a moment,' as he turned his attention to Zeke, leaning to whisper into the vampire's ear.



Penny was hovering beside me, her eyes fixed on Zeke as she wrung her hands. The two of them had been notably absent when the group of us sat down for a picnic a few hours earlier, and based on the glow of her skin and the sparkle in her eyes, I had a sneaking suspicion I knew exactly what they'd been up to.

I watched as Xander and Zeke nodded at each other, their plans finalized, and then he wrapped an arm around Oliver's shoulder and led him away to talk in private. My stomach was in knots, my throat tight and my mouth dry. My time spent in Crimson Creek felt so simple compared to this. The fate of my world was hanging in the balance, and I was at a loss as to how to stop it.

"It's imperative the book is given to your aunt as soon as possible," Andromeda said as she glided in my direction.

I swallowed past the lump in my throat, tilting my chin upward as I looked into her eyes. "It's a long journey to Winter Forest from Crimson Creek—"

"It's a single minute from this realm to Winter Forest," Andromeda said with a girlish chuckle, waving her hand in dismissal. She removed one of the many rings she wore on her fingers, turning the ring over in her palm before handing it to me. It was ancient, the band glistened green with patina as I held it into the light. A smooth, rounded piece of jade was the other stone within its simple setting.

Jade, like the kind that could be found along the beach in Winter Forest, like the jade my father had made into wedding rings for himself and my mother. I met Andromeda's eyes and she smiled.

"Come, it's time to go," she beckoned, and I stepped forward, taking her outstretched hand. My free hand laid over the swell of my belly, which seemed to be doubling in size every day. I had a slight waddle to my gait now, and I could feel the baby moving sometimes, but not often. It was impossible to calculate how far along I was now, especially since so much time was passing in the pack lands in our absence.

We'd been in this place for two weeks, maybe less.

That could have been months back home.

What were we walking into once we breached the rift between our realms?

Xander came up behind me, Oliver by his side. I turned to look at Penny, who was standing hand in hand with Zeke. Zeke nodded at me in farewell.

"He's going to find Henry and Elaine, and bring them back here," Xander said quickly as we left the clearing and began walking through a dense, overgrown forest.

Andromeda led the way, and we walked in silence, followed by the acolytes, one of which was carrying the book.

We stepped into a new clearing, dark and shadowed by a mix of trees that wouldn't normally grow together—willow trees with thick trunks and billowing branches that brushed the ground, mingled with towering spruce and birch trees with white, chalky bark.

I could smell the salt and wood stove smoke as we neared a temple made of ancient stone, grown over with moss.

“This is how Morrighan and I used to visit each other,” Andromeda said with a long, wistful sigh. She lost herself in a memory for a moment, a sadness blurring her features, but then she snapped back to reality and turned to me. “You look like her, you know—such fair, delicate features.”

“Were you friends?”

“Oh,” Andromeda smiled sadly, tearing her gaze away from mine as she exhaled deeply with her eyes now fixed on the temple. “Yes, we were friends. I would say... if my kind had the blessing of a mate bond, we would have shared the bond, her and I. I loved her, so very much. But, we were of different realms, different peoples.”

Pain flashed behind her eyes for a split second before she blinked, then she turned back in the way she came, motioning for the acolytes to step forward with the book. They tried to hand the book to Xander, but Andromeda shook her head, pointing to Oliver instead.

“It’s for him to give to her,” Andromeda said, nodding at Oliver, who looked a little stunned as he gathered the silk-wrapped book in his arms. Andromeda looked between Xander and me, then nodded in farewell before walking away.

I turned to Xander as the clearing went quiet. Oliver shifted his weight uncomfortably. We’d been dressed in fine clothing, with Oliver and Xander dressed in leather and dark fabrics, and myself in a pale blue dress that brushed my ankles as I walked. Andromeda had brushed my hair, her strokes causing it to lengthen until it was nearing my waist, and she twisted it into long braids that she wove into a glistening silver and moonstone crown.

She’d mentioned in passing that it had been a gift, and I realized as I reached up to touch the moonstones that it had been a gift to her from Morrighan. Who else could have worn silver without it burning their skin, but the daughter of the original Moon Goddess?

“Do we just... go in?” Oliver asked, his eyes shining like two different colored gems in the light filtering down through the canopy of trees.

“I guess so,” I breathed.

Xander ran his knuckles down the back of my upper arm, then knitted his hand in mine. “Where does this lead?” he asked.

“Home,” I said, and took a step forward, then another, and another, until I was standing at the threshold of the sanctuary that felt so familiar and yet like it had been plucked from a distant memory.

I opened the door, needing Xander’s help to push it open, and all three of us stepped inside.

Cobwebs covered every surface. The dust was thick, and the air was stale. Xander paused to look around, releasing my hand from his so I could walk forward.

I ran my fingertips across the tops of the pews as I walked toward the altar. Oliver huffed a breath behind me, choking a bit on the dust. Moonlight poured in through the stained glass windows, drifting down in dusty rays of silver over a spray of white roses that sat at the base of the altar.

“Where’s the portal?” Xander asked. His voice echoed, but was absorbed into the sound of rushing waves, and muted voices. Xander stepped toward the window to look outside, and Oliver walked up behind me to peer at the roses over my shoulder.

I thought I heard my aunt Kacidra, of all people, chattering away. Then... was that aunt Maeve’s voice laughing in return?

I turned around, my body going rigid as my mother appeared in the doorway of the temple, her body dusted with snow and her clothes soaking wet. The flashlight she held in her hand was shaking, her golden brown eyes wide and unblinking. Oliver turned to look at her, a sigh of relief leaving his lips.

But Mom looked as though she’d seen a ghost. She wasn’t moving. Her breath was caught.

“Mama?” I said, taking a step toward her. “Mama? Wake up!”

She blinked and brought her hand to her temple, her breath trembling as she closed her eyes and shook her head. She kept them closed for several seconds, then opened them again.

“Oh, my Goddess,” she breathed, dropping the flashlight. Tears welled in my eyes as we began to rush toward each other. I threw my arms around her, and she pressed me into her chest in a tight embrace.

“You looked like you saw a ghost,” Oliver quipped, and Mom choked on a laugh.

“You won’t believe me,” she whispered, her cheek pressed against mine as she raised her head to look over my shoulder at Oliver. “I’ve seen this very moment before.”

## [Chapter 607](#)

ALEXIS

\*Lena\*

Winter Forest used to be little more than a village nestled against an ice-covered inlet, surrounded by mountains. This time of year, the mountains were bathed in snow so pale it shimmered with every color of the sunrise as we navigated an ice-covered trail toward the sprawling city that now rose over the water.

So much had changed over the years. The old village, which had been there when my grandmother was my age, was still nestled in a wooded bluff near a river, but the new city of Winter Forest was a cozy metropolis with four-story buildings, an ongoing winter festival, and several schools and hospitals to house its booming population.

My grandparents had given up the home my dad and Aunt Maeve had grown up in and moved into the castle, which was also home to my extended family, who settled in Winter Forest when I was a kid. George and Eliza had grown up here, and in a way, the rest of us had too.

But I’d rarely visited Winter Forest in the winter. We usually spent our summers here. Seeing it in all its glory, the buildings glazed with icicles and puffing fragrant wood smoke into the air.... Well, I felt an overwhelming sense of “home” as I held my mother’s hand and walked around the outside of the city, toward the castle.

She draped me in a long parka, but I didn't feel so much as a chill. Xander and Oliver tagged behind us, Oliver still carrying the book in his hands.

"Why didn't I know about the other temple?" Oliver asked. Mom glanced at him over her shoulder, her breath puffing mist as she replied.

"Winter is the only time you can access it. Rosalie told Maeve and me that it had been swallowed up by a glacier long ago, but we found it a few years after you and Lena were born. We'd been out hiking while your dad and Rowan took you kids fishing, so we could have a break."

Mom had already told us about why she'd come to the old Temple of the White Queens. She'd been unable to sleep and had a dream that made it impossible to fall back asleep. For whatever reason, she was pulled to the old temple, and she set out on an early morning walk along the edge of the inlet to where the remains of the temple laid upon a shallow island that was covered in water most of the year.

She'd crossed the ice and thought she'd heard voices. Lo and behold, there we were.

"I dreamt about this moment before either of you were born," she'd told us as we left the temple. "It was the first time I saw you, but I didn't know who you were at the time. You were standing there, dressed the same. I don't think Maeve knew about you yet, Oliver. That was before she found out about the triplets."

Xander hadn't said a word during Mom's retelling of her two-decade-old vision of the future. He looked suspicious and tired, his body refusing to relax even as we reached the castle.

It couldn't have been later than 8:00 in the morning based on the cooking smells coming from the open doors of the dining hall, which was adjacent to the kitchen. Breakfast was being made, and my stomach curled with anticipation.

We stood in the foyer, Xander and Oliver shivering as they wrung their chilled hands together. Mom helped me out of my coat as a maid approached, her arms outstretched to receive the parka and the rest of the winter clothing Mom was wearing.

But I felt Mom's eyes on me, her gaze lowering to the swell of my stomach, which was partially hidden by the flowing fabric of my dress. The parka had made it impossible to tell that I was pregnant, but now....

She met my eye, then looked at Xander, her brow furrowed and eyes glistening.

"How much time has passed since we've been gone?" Oliver asked.

My mom turned to him, her face full of confusion and emotion. "You've been gone for a month, Oliver," she said softly, then she turned her eyes back to me. "Lena—"

"How long has it been since we stole the Persephone?" Xander asked bluntly.

Mom swallowed, turning her gaze on him. "Three months, maybe a little longer—"

Three months? That would make it... March. A lump formed in my throat as I turned and looked over my shoulder at Xander.

So much time had passed, and there was so much that needed to happen now. How could we stop this war? Who would even believe us about what we'd witnessed, and been through?

"Where the f\*\*k have you been, Oliver?"

All three of us snapped our heads up toward the second floor landing where a disheveled looking Maeve was standing, her face burning with fury. Oliver cleared his throat, coloring as he squared his shoulders at his mother. She rushed down the stairs, her plush bathrobe billowing out behind her as she closed in on us.

She stopped short of Oliver and let out a strained breath, then threw her arms around him in a tight embrace. Mom made a choked noise in her throat, her eyes glistening with tears as mother and son reunited for the first time in months.

Xander shifted his weight behind me, looking slightly uncomfortable and anxious.

Maeve finally released Oliver and looked down between them at the silk wrapped book he was holding. He handed it to her as though it were nothing more than a gift from the far off land we'd been exploring instead of a book of spells that could alter the trajectory of our world.

"What is this?" Maeve asked, turning to look at the group of us. Her gaze slid to my belly, then to my Mom, then to Xander. "Oh. You all have some major explaining to do."

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Grandma was listening intently as Xander, Oliver, and I explained what we'd been through, her eyes darting from us, to Maeve and my mom as we told them about meeting Andromeda. She straightened her back, tucking a lock of her glossy white hair behind her ear as she lifted a tea cup to her mouth and took an audible sip.

"Me? I don't understand," Maeve interjected as I told her about how the God of Night had given me the book and told me to give it Andromeda, and then to the twentieth White Queen.

"Did the people of Dianny ever mention anything like this when you were there?" Mom asked as she flipped through the book. Maeve was leaning over Mom's shoulder, shaking her head.

"No. Not at all."

"They said you'd be powerful, Maeve," Grandma said, tilting her head toward the book. "We never knew what that meant."

"What am I supposed to do? Start casting spells?" Maeve huffed, looking around the table. Xander and Oliver were seated at the end of the table, picking at their plates of breakfast and looking overall no worse for wear.

"It would be fantastic," Oliver mused, "if these 'higher beings' had any idea what the hell we're supposed to do—"

"It's a game to them," Xander cut in, his voice void of emotion. "They already know the outcome of this war. Andromeda likely knew exactly when, why, and how Queen Maeve is supposed to use this book."

“Just Maeve,” Maeve smiled, her eyes linking with Xander’s for a moment before she looked down at the book again. She sighed deeply, squeezing Mom’s shoulders before walking back to her seat. “Well, it’ll take me a while to study this book. Rowan and Troy have already sent their armies to Breles.”

“How quickly can I get to Breles?” Xander said, and I started, my chest tightening as I tried to meet his eyes, but he was looking at Grandma.

“By plane, a little over a day,” she replied.

“I need to find my Beta and go to Egoren to gather my troops. How quickly can the plane be readied—”

“Xander,” I said, rising from my chair.

Xander shook his head, meeting my eye for the first time since we had all sat down at the breakfast table.

“Within an hour,” Grandma said softly, and my gaze shot to her.

I didn’t bother to hide my heartbreak. Xander and I hadn’t talked about this.

Xander only nodded, murmuring something to Oliver, and the two of them rose from their seats. I tried to follow, but Mom’s hand clasped around my wrist, bringing me to a halt.

“Mom—”

“Lena, we need to talk to you about this,” she said, her eyes pleading with mine for understanding. “We need to have a serious conversation about the fact that you’re pregnant. You can’t follow him into war like this.”

“Your mother is right,” Grandma added.

Maeve looked like she was struggling to agree, but she nodded her head regardless.

“Just give him a moment; we won’t prevent you from having a moment alone with him before he leaves,” Mom whispered as I sat down.

Grandma was speaking to a maid, directing her to have a plane readied for departure. I slumped into my chair.

They wanted to know how exactly I’d managed myself in the realm of the vampires. I told them everything, sparing no detail about what I’d seen and what I’d done. Mom’s eyes never left mine, but the color of her cheeks changed several times in line with the emotions playing across her face. Maeve listened in stoic silence, and Grandma seemed proud, if not slightly amused.

Half an hour passed with Xander and Oliver returning. Both were dressed in fresh, warm clothes and carrying duffle bags of gear. Xander was freshly showered, his hair still wet as he set his bag down and turned to look at me.

“Can we talk?” he asked.

“Yes,” I replied hurriedly, rushing to get out of my seat. I followed him into the foyer, and then led him into a sitting room in the main hall. A fire was burning in the fireplace, and the warmth embraced me as a chill of nerves ran up my spine at the same moment.

Xander shut the door behind him, clicking the lock into place before rushing toward me. I pressed myself into his chest, his hand cupping the back of my head as we stood in each other’s arms.

“I have to do this,” he whispered into my hair.

“I know,” I cried.

“I’ll find you, I promise. I’ll be there with you when our daughter is born.”

“Don’t promise me that,” I said in a choked whisper.

I was so tired of the separation. I was tired of the danger and what ifs, and whens, keeping us apart. I loved him. I was so stupid for not admitting that right away. If I had, I would have had more time with him, more time to just... be with him.

He had to battle, I could see it in his eyes. He’d fight for not only his lands but mine. He’d fight for his unborn daughter’s future. He’d fight for me, for us.

And I could do nothing but sit back and watch as he threw himself into bloodshed and chaos that I didn’t yet know how to stop.

“I love you,” he whispered, clutching me against his chest.

“I love you,” I replied tearfully, closing my eyes as my tears wet the sweater he was wearing.

“You’re my mate, Lena. I’ll be here, always. If anything were to happen to me—”

“Don’t—”

“Our daughter. I know you’ll protect her. I know you’ll love her. Tell her—” his voice broke around the words, and I whimpered as he continued, “Tell her everything. Tell her how I was a fool for not telling you I loved you the second I saw you for the first time. Tell her I love her.”

“Xander, don’t—”

“I will be there when she’s born,” he whispered, kissing my forehead, “even if it’s only in spirit. I promise, Lena. I promise you.”

I wanted to say I was going with him, to demand it. But I knew it would be in vain. His hand slid to my stomach, and against his touch I felt the baby flutter, which caused fresh tears to fall from my lashes.

“What are you going to name her?” he asked in a strained whisper as he pressed his forehead to mine, the two of us beginning to sway as though we rocked the baby between us.

“Alexis,” I whispered, meeting his eyes. “Her name will be Alexis, after my mate. Her dad.”

## [Chapter 608](#)

\*Lena\*

Time passed in a blur of mingled stillness and impossible activity. I spent much of my days in Winter Forest sitting in the library at the castle, snuggled in a plush blanket and flannel pajamas while I stared blankly at the same page of the same book I'd been trying to read for nearly a week.

I knew I wouldn't hear from Xander for a while, likely a very long time if I was being honest with myself. Mom did her best to lift my spirits. On the third day after Xander and Oliver left, she started reading aloud to me in the confines of the library from books I'd loved from my childhood spent running wild in this territory.

Maeve joined in on the fourth day, sitting with her long legs draped over my mother's lap as she rested her head on the armrest and stared at the ceiling with the same blank expression I wore on my own face. All three of her sons, my cousins, were in Breles. Her husband, her mate, was there too. Her brother, my father, would be fighting beside them all.

We just didn't know when the first thundering of war would sound, and every minute waiting was a cruel game of what-ifs.

Grandma Rosalie was the one who kept us fed and warm while we holed up in the library. Snow fell heavily outside the frosted windows as cart after cart of tea was wheeled in, though often left untouched, untasted.

On the fifth day, Grandma joined us in the "depression nest," wrapping a thick blanket around her shoulders as she settled on the couch next to me, resting her hand against my knee.

But on the sixth day, my grandpa came to the library, and our self-pity party was forced to an abrupt end.

"This is getting ridiculous," he grumbled, easing himself into an armchair with a view of all four of us.

"Why? I thought you'd enjoy a break from all of us women," Maeve yawned, twirling a lock of her red hair around her finger.

"Every blanket in the castle is currently in the library," he continued, motioning toward the twin couches we had claimed, which faced each other with a coffee table in between, which was currently littered with books. The spell book sat on top of the strewn books, its leather cover shimmering in the reflection of the fire. We'd taken turns flipping through the pages, looking for something, anything, substantial, but had found nothing.

"Leave us be, Ethan," Grandma smiled softly.

Grandpa furrowed his brow, looking at us one by one. Maeve narrowed her eyes at him, sizing him up.

"Don't look at us like that, Dad."

"Why not? You're all acting like infants."

"You know for a fact that if I had a choice, I'd be in Breles with the rest of the armies, not wasting my years of warrior training trying to figure out what I'm meant to do with this!" she waves her hand



toward the book for emphasis, then tucked her hand back under her blanket, scowling. "I hate that I'm not there."

"Me too," I agreed, and Grandpa settled his gaze on me. He'd been filled in on the situation when he returned to Winter Forest two days ago, after a long trip from Breles with a stop in Mirage. All of the Alphas were congregating in Breles, where news of new night attacks was starting to trickle in from the westernmost packs in Findali.

There were no armies of vampires yet, though. They hadn't found the portal, or they hadn't figured out how to cross in large numbers.

The elders of the pack lands, mostly retired Alphas who'd passed down their titles, or high ranking men and women tasked with forming the committees that kept peace in the pack lands, had taken over for the younger Alphas who were leading their warriors into battle.

My grandfather was an elder now, and a very opinionated one at that.

"Well, figure out the book and then you can go, Maeve," he said, crossing his arms over his chest. "It's that simple."

"But it's not that simple," Mom cut in, casting Grandpa a long look. "We don't know what we're looking for."

"What about... contacting the High Priestess?" Grandma asked.

Maeve tilted her head, considering. "It's actually not a bad idea. Monica has been helpful in a lot of different ways. Maybe she can grant us access to the records they keep in the temple," Maeve said as she straightened up a bit.

"We should involve Mara as well," Mom added, and I immediately went rigid, remembering my meeting with Mara, one of the refugees from Dianny and the younger sister of none other than Tasia, when she had been overseeing the investigation of Morhan University and their damning misconduct involving the safety of students.

"We'd have to tell them the truth of the matter," Grandma said.

"There won't be much need to explain. Word is already spreading about what's being seen in the rural villages in Findali. Rumors are spreading. Oliver, Xander, and his Beta have been tasked with readying the forces of the Alphas for battle—"

"You've seen Xander?" I asked hurriedly. Grandpa nodded, settling back against his armchair.

"When I left for Mirage, he was preparing to head south for Egoren, with his Beta. He brought a family of.... vampires, to Breles. To help train—"

"Gideon and Alma?" I asked excitedly, damn near jumping to my feet. I got tangled in the blankets and nearly tripped over my grandma, who steadied me with her arm.

"Maybe. I didn't ask their names."

I felt a flood of relief wash over me. Xander was leaving Breles. He was going to Egoren. He'd be safe, at least for a little while longer. I wondered if Abigail had gone with him, and then prayed that she had. Maybe Adrian would force her to stay in Egoren, out of harm's way.

Grandma stood up and stretched her arms over her head, and I caught Grandpa's gaze as he watched her. Even after over forty years together, there was still a flicker of longing in his eyes. He hid it well, and it was gone in an instant as he braced himself and rose from his chair, his hand wrapping around the head of his cane.

"That little girl," he asked Grandma, "is she still coming to dinner tonight?"

"Sasha?" Grandma asked with a laugh. "Yes. Why do you ask?"

"I got out the old train set for her to play with, the one that the boys used to love. She looked rather bored when they came to dinner last week—" Grandpa's voice faded as he walked out of the library with Grandma.

I sat still for a moment as I was hit with a sudden realization that, hopefully, would change things for the better when it came to the book.

"Sasha's mother, Clare. Did she tell you about her history?" I asked my mom and Maeve, looking between them.

Maeve looked at Mom, the two of them looking confused.

I took a deep breath, choking on a laugh. "Clare's a seer. Her mother was Lycennian. She... she might be able to help us."

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Clare walked a wide circle around the table the book was sitting on, her eyes narrowed into slits. Sasha was playing in the dining hall just across the foyer from us, her blonde pigtails bouncing as she jumped up and down with excitement as Grandpa put together the train set for her.

Clare's powers of sight were different from what Mom and I could do. She didn't have visions. She didn't really see anything at all. But she could feel things, which seemed significant to me, since we'd looked and looked through the book and were obviously missing something substantial.

"I don't like this," Clare huffed, crossing her arms over her chest, her golden brown hair trembling as she shook her head. She was dressed in a cream colored turtleneck sweater and jeans, and had the same scowl on her face that I remembered her by. She hadn't bothered to tell me what happened to her after the fall of Cedar Hollow. I wasn't even going to ask. Xander was convinced that Hale had died in that battle, and I didn't want to bring up her brother's death, not now.

"What do you mean?" Mom asked. Clare pursed her lips, taking a step toward the book with her hand overstretched, then pulled her hand away, clenching it into a fist.

"This is dark, whatever it is. There's some kind of... barrier around it. It hurts to even come near it," she said. "It... burns."

"It burned Xander, too," I said. "And he's of Lycaon's line."

“But do you see anything?” Maeve urged.

Clare sighed, motioning toward the book. “Open it for me.”

I stepped forward and opened it to the title page. Clare stepped forward, her jaw flexing as she leaned over the table to get a better look.

The font was incredibly small, almost hard to read, and was handwritten.

“That’s Morrighan’s name,” she said, and I nodded.

“This book belonged to her.”

Clare closed her eyes for a split second, then opened them wide, shaking her head.

“Again, this is very dark stuff, old stuff.”

“Mommy?” Sasha said as she skipped into the room.

Clare leaned away from the book, looking in Sasha’s direction.

“He is taking a long time with the twains,” Sasha shrugged, pointing a finger across the foyer to the dining hall, where Grandpa was sitting on the floor, piecing the wooden tracks together with the calculated precision of an engineer. He probably hadn’t even noticed Sasha had left the room.

“What is that sound?” Sasha said before any of us could reply to her. She put her hands over her ears, pouting.

“What sound?” Clare asked, looking around.

We all looked around, but it was quiet in the library.

“Someone singing, right there!” Sasha pointed to the book before putting her hands over her ears again.

“Singing?” I said, glancing at my mom and Maeve before turning back to Sasha.

Clare’s brow furrowed as she reached for her daughter, guiding her toward the book. “What are they singing, sweetheart? Do you know the words?”

“They’re howling,” Sasha said, screwing her face into a grimace.

Clare and I met each other’s eyes.

“Howling?” Mom said, but Maeve stepped forward, closing the book and gathering it in her arms.

Clare turned Sasha toward the foyer and led her away, glancing back at us over her shoulder with a look that said she understood what needed to happen next.

But I wasn’t totally sure what was happening.

Maeve ran her tongue along the inside of her lower lip, looking thoughtfully down at the book.

“This is supposed to be read... I think—I think I need to shift to make sense of this.”

“Why did Sasha hear howling when none of us heard it?” I asked.

“Magic, I guess,” Maeve sighed, her eyes lost in thought. “I’ll try after dinner.”

## [Chapter 609](#)

### Chapter 109 : Only Death Will End the Bloodshed

\*Maeve\*

I bet you didn’t expect to see me here.

It’s not my story, after all. At least, it wasn’t until the moment my son placed that heavy leather-bound book in my hands.

Once upon a time, a long time ago, I was a young woman on a mission to save my world from destruction. I’d been told it would end with me, that my powers would be beyond reason. But then... nothing. Hanna was the one who killed Tasia, the Lycennian Dream Dancer hell-bent on destroying everything, and everyone, we knew and loved. Hanna was also the one to bring forth the conclusion of the Moonstone Prophecy, giving birth to Selene, the next White Queen—our Lena, my beloved Lena.

I was happy to fall back into the background. All I cared about in those early years after the fall of Lycenna and Dianny were my triplet sons and my mate. I threw myself into motherhood. I threw myself into mending the fractured pack of Poldesse by Troy’s side. The years ticked by, quiet, uneventful.

But then I... I got pregnant again.

It had been a shock. It was a miracle, if I was being honest, that I was able to carry another pregnancy full term after the trauma of having the triplets. Our boys were almost twelve years old at the time. We had thought we were done. We had decided our triplet princes were enough.

“It’s a boy,” the nurse had said as she placed the infant in my arms—my fourth son, our baby, Lucas. I looked into his sweet, innocent face and... I panicked. It all came rushing back to me, overwhelming me. My time in Dianny flashed before my eyes—Una’s words, telling us all that my children would be sons, all FOUR of them... all of the questions, the warnings, the lingering doubts that our troubles weren’t over strangled me until I found it hard to breathe.

There was a time the visions of seers were taken with a grain of salt. Even Hanna’s visions were doubted, and by herself more than anyone.

But now, as I stood deep within the forest, the ice-covered river creaking and hissing steam in my periphery, a vision from a time long past wouldn’t ease its grip on me, just like I couldn’t seem to ease the grip on the howling book of spells.

I saw two white wolves in a clearing, one standing protectively over the other. I’d seen it while standing in that circle of stones in Dianny; everyone had. I’d been told it was me and my mother.

I realized, as I knelt in the snow to lay the book on the ground in the light of a crescent moon, that those wolves were me and someone who had not yet been born at the time.

“I hate magic,” I breathed, closing my eyes against the soft, feral whimpers of the book as I opened its pages.

I'd gone out after dinner like I said I would. I refused to let Hanna, Lena, or Clare follow me into the woods. This I could do by myself. I wasn't sure what was going to happen, and I could admit it had been a long time since I'd shifted. What-ifs had clogged my mind during what ended up being a quiet supper. Dad and Sasha ended up picking at their plates on the floor, playing with the train set. None of us women had a single word to say over our plates of broiled salmon and fingerling potatoes.

I'd dressed for the frigid night, a quilted parka covering my body and a thick wool hat shielding my ears and forehead. Stripping naked in the middle of a snow covered forest was the last thing I wanted to do.

But, I needed to shift. If the secrets of this book could only be accessed in wolf form, and for some Goddess forsaken reason, only by me... well, I didn't have much of a choice now, did I?

I undressed, hanging my clothes on a low-lying tree branch as the snow bit into my toes. Shivering and as naked as the day I was born, I stepped back into the moonlit clearing and took a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves.

The transformation took place, and within a second, I was shrouded in warmth as my body shifted to that lean, silvery white wolf. I pawed the ground, then stretched, shaking out my fur. I was nearly as pale as the snow covering the forest floor. I sat back on my haunches, lowering my head to gaze down at the book.

I heard a crunch to my left and snapped my head around, teeth bared. A moose peered at me with a shocked expression, its antlers trembling as it took several steps back into the brush and thundered away.

'Are you alright out there?' Hanna said through the mind-link. 'Do you want me to come to you?'

'I'm alright,' I replied, watching the dark form of the moose disappear as it crossed the ice-covered river.

Hanna wasn't one to pry, but I knew she was likely waiting by a window in the castle, pining for information. I grinned internally at the thought of Hanna wringing her hands while I pranced in the woods with the ancient spellbook.

Hanna and I were bound together in a strange way, something rare. It was almost like a mate bond, and I knew she could feel every ripple of my anxiety coursing through my veins as I lay down on my belly, weighing my options about how to approach this odd situation.

The book was no longer howling. Its pages rustled in the chilled breeze, mingling with the muted whispers lifting from within—soft, feminine voices, some whispering in hushed tones while others giggled.

My ears twitched as I listened, but I was unable to interpret any words. It was just... noise.

I let out a low, guttural growl, sliding upward into a lunge. For whatever reason, I felt as though I was supposed to approach the book without being invited to come forward. I wasn't sure why, and it didn't entirely make sense, but I just felt as though I was waiting for something.

The voices halted on the next breeze, which was more of a stiff gust of wind. The book slid across the snow in the wind's wake, its pages flapping wildly. I rose to all fours and watched as the book came to rest, a single page dropping to the side, laying open and still.

A hush spread over the clearing, and through the trees, I could see... eyes—dozens and dozens of them, pale silver and blue, looking right at me, unblinking. My ruff stood on end as the eyes stared at me in unison. Suddenly, they disappeared, and I saw what I can only describe as shadows kneeling and bowing to me, some taking a knee before they straightened up again and were swallowed up by the night, only their eyes remaining.

I swallowed, my upper lip trembling as I forced myself not to bare my teeth at the spirits lingering in the woods.

“Witch!” came a ribbon of giggles that wove between the trees, echoing away.

‘I’m not a witch,’ I said through the mind-link, unable to form more than growls, yaps, and howls in my wolf form.

“Come to us, daughter of Morrighan. Let us show you the answers you seek.”

A chill ran up my spine as the mind-link crackled, and Hanna’s voice cut through my mind.

‘What’s happening?’ she said hurriedly, but I was already walking forward toward the book.

I looked down at the pages, finding the book remarkably changed. Instead of indecipherable text, the pages were covered in images that moved across the page, turning and twisting as if they were dancing. My eyes went wide as I watched what I knew, without a doubt, was the entire story of my lands, my people, and our gods playing out in rapid succession.

Centuries ticked by in seconds. I saw my own birth, my childhood, my journey to the moonstones and my mate, then the birth of my sons, my kingdom, every intimate touch of Troy’s body against mine.

My heart was thundering in my chest as images went on and on, illustrated as though someone had painted every moment of my life.

But then, it kept going, and going, and going. Then it stopped, with a picture of a white wolf in a snow-covered clearing standing before a well of gem-like eyes.

“Shall we show you your future?”

‘I need to know how to stop this war,’ I replied.

I wondered if they could hear me. Hanna could, and she was frantically trying to mind-link with me, but I shielded the connection, blocking her out.

“Your son will be the hero you seek,” the voices drawled in unison.

‘I don’t seek a hero,’ I said with force, another shiver running up my spine. My son? Which son?

“There is only one way to end the bloodshed when it begins, and that is with death.”

‘Obviously,’ I ground out, this time baring my teeth and growling as I sent my reply through the mind-link. ‘What spell am I supposed to use? And how?’

“A union has been made. The fracture between the twins has mended.” The book snapped shut, falling over on its side. I jumped backward as the book shook violently, then stopped, settling against the snow. “Open it, witch. Let us show you what you must do.”

I pawed the book open, cursing internally. Thumbs would have been nice to have at this moment.

The book was blank, save for one single page in the center. I knew the faces I was looking at—me, Hanna, my mother, and Lena... Mara, the sister of Tasia... and Clare.

“The coven must reunite and call to Morrighan to shelter the realm,” the voices whispered, their voices like music. “The moonstones... the lily... silver, and stone.”

Suddenly the clearing went quiet, and the eyes disappeared. The image on the page faded.

But then, I heard a faint whisper. A single voice remained, its tone somber. Another image appeared on the page, and I felt my heart sink into my stomach as I gazed upon it.

“A gift,” the voice said, fading away as it retreated into the clearing.

I abruptly shifted back to my human form, hugging myself with my arms as tears rolled down my cheeks. Hanna was beating against the mind-link, trying to get in.

The page went blank, then filled with its unusual scrawl, erasing all evidence of the image that was now etched forever into my mind.

It had shown me my entire life.

And then, it had shown me my death.

## [Chapter 610](#)

### Chapter 110 : Show Me the Portal

\*Lena\*

I woke to faint sunlight filtering in between the thick curtains blanketing the frost-covered windows in my room at the castle of Winter Forest. Another day closer to the war, another day further from Xander.

Maeve had gone out into the woods with the book last night, and we had waited up for her to return. She came inside, her parka hanging loose over her shoulders and her glorious copper blonde hair tousled and fanning out beneath her hat. Her face was blank and flushed, and she had a distant look in her eyes.

She handed my mom the book, murmuring, “All of us are meant to gather—you and I, Lena, Mom, Clare... Mara too.”

“We’ll get Mara here as soon as possible—” Mom had begun, but Maeve turned on her heel and walked away, gliding up the staircase like a ghost.

A feeling had settled in my gut that twisted and lurched for the rest of the night, making it nearly impossible to sleep. Whatever Maeve had seen, or heard, had wrecked her beyond words.

Her face at the breakfast table was like frosted glass when I finally joined the rest of the family for our morning meal. She didn't touch a scrap of food, and my mom silently took away her tepid and stale cup of coffee and replaced it with a new one, which Maeve didn't so much as sip.

Grandma was staring at her, her eyes narrowed on Maeve's face. She was searching for something within Maeve's eyes that I myself couldn't see. I shifted in my seat and pressed a hand over my growing belly, pressing gently until I felt the baby kick against my touch. I heaved a breath, and reached for my tea, catching my mom's eye.

"The midwife is coming tomorrow," Mom said with a smile. "She has a birth to attend to today."

"She's been rather busy the past week," Grandma added with a sigh, her mouth curving into a proud smile. "If I'd been told that Winter Forest would be as it is now, I wouldn't have believed it. The pack has come so far in forty years."

"Have any of you been to Egoren?" I asked.

Grandma shrugged one shoulder as she dropped a sugar cube into her coffee and stirred. "Your grandfather has, several years ago now, after Soren came back with his daughter, Ciana."

"What is it like?"

"He said it's rather beautiful, lush and green—a temperate climate, much like eastern Findali. Forested. But, I haven't been there myself." Grandma brought her coffee to her lips, giving me a smile. "He said—"

"The book showed me how I will die."

Maeve's voice broke through the conversation like a heated blade. I dropped my fork, and Mom spilled her coffee across the white tablecloth as the three of us stared at Maeve. A single tear rolled down her cheek. She reached up and wiped it away, sniffing as she shook her head and tucked her hands in her lap. "I'm fine—"

"Maeve," Mom said with nothing but tenderness and concern in her voice.

"It won't be soon," Maeve said, a choked laugh escaping her throat. "Troy and I, we go—we go together."

Grandma's eyes were clouded with tears as Maeve met her gaze. Maeve gave a sad shrug, tilting her head to side as though trying to physically brush away the image in her mind.

I thought back on the conversation I'd had with Xander and Charlie on the beach. It felt like so long ago now. We'd talked about the rumor that my grandma was immortal, which had seemed so incredibly far fetched at the time. But looking at my grandma now, I wondered if it was a possibility. The pain that lingered behind her eyes was palpable, like she was looking deep within her daughter's soul and seeing just how fragile it was, and how fleeting Maeve's life would be compared to her own.

I wanted to ask. I wanted it all laid out on the table and open for honest discussion, but I knew now was not the time.

"How?" Grandma asked, a sudden sternness to her voice that made me pause my musing and look right at her.



My mom shifted her weight in the chair, her mouth opening to protest my grandma's inquiry. Knowing your own death... that was deeply personal. I couldn't imagine what harboring that knowledge felt like.

"In our bed," she said, reaching for her coffee and draining it in one swallow.

Mom ran her tongue along the inside of her lower lip, her eyes shifting from Grandma to Maeve. Grandma held Maeve's gaze, and for a moment, I thought they might have been mind-linking.

Grandma sighed heavily, a flash of frustration sweeping behind her eyes as she stood and pushed in her chair, motioning to me.

"Meet me in the temple, Lena. There's a lot you need to know and to learn."

I sunk into my chair and toyed with a piece of bacon as Grandma left the dining hall. Mom sucked on her lower lip, watching Grandma as she left the room and started up the stairs, out of hearing range.

"I don't think... I don't think it was painful," Maeve said in a near whisper, sucking in her breath. "But something felt off about it."

"We don't have to talk about it now, Maeve," Mom replied hastily, catching the edge of grief in Maeve's tone.

"They said it was a gift," Maeve choked through a sob. "What a f\*\*\*\*\*g awful gift—"

Mom was out of her chair in an instant kneeling before Maeve with her arms wrapped around her stomach. I felt tears welling in my own eyes. I had known they were close, but my mom could feel every jagged edge of pain washing over Maeve at that moment.

I don't think I'd been as close to anyone, other than Xander, as Maeve and my mom were close to each other. I felt like I was intruding and slowly set my fork down near my plate.

I rose from my chair, totally unnoticed by them as I left the room and hurried upstairs. Grandma was talking to a maid in the hallway, and she turned to me as I approached.

"We can walk to the temple together," I said, coming to a stop on the second floor landing.

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"All of the women Maeve mentioned have powers that go beyond the limitations of our kind," Grandma explained as we walked through the old village of Winter Forest, which was on the outskirts of the city that had spread out beyond it. Grandma's arm was looped in mine as we walked, but not because she needed assistance. She was strong and lean, and looked several decades younger than she actually was. I felt like she was assisting me instead.

The temple of the White Queens was a beautiful cultural landmark overlooking the inlet. In the summer it was covered in thickets of white roses, but now it was glazed with ice from being so close to the water, its walls of white and silver granite shimmering in the sunlight.

I'd been here several times over the course of my life. It was a gathering place for those who worshipped the Moon Goddess in what was considered "the old ways," which the Church of The Moon

Goddess, which was the more prevalent religion outside of Winter Forest, considered pagan and mystical.

Grandma sometimes held services for the worshippers, but she mostly left that to the temple attendants and priestesses who lived and worked around the temple, which had grown greatly in size over the past decade or so.

It had been destroyed once, shattered in chunks of granite when Tasia blasted through what Mom and Grandma called the “spirit realm” and tore the place to shreds.

The temple was empty when we entered. Rows and rows of wooden pews led to the altar, where a great statue of the Moon Goddess was erected. A pendant hung around her neck, three moonstones in its center—the three stones Grandma had combined to save Maeve’s life when she was giving birth to my cousins.

Grandma waved her arms in a circle, smiling. “I come here when I want some peace,” she said with a grin, then sighed, a pang of sadness flushing the color from her cheeks.

“Are you immortal?” I asked without meaning to.

Grandma huffed a breath, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. “Well, no one has tried to kill me in a long time, so I don’t actually know. Our healing blood prevents us from falling ill like other people, so... it’s difficult for me to know for sure. That’s the rumor.”

“But it’s true that Grandpa is refusing help—”

“Your grandpa is a grouchy old man, and has been one since the day I met him. He’s stubborn.”

“But you can’t die... you can’t die without each other?”

“I believe so, yes. As mates... fated mates, we are tethered, shared souls. But the moonlight lily may have played into that idea. That spell is... the most powerful I’ve come across.”

I ran my fingers over the top of one of the pews, tapping my fingernails against the wood.

I could tell that she wanted to talk about Maeve as much as I did, but neither of us were willing to say a word about it.

“I want you to show me what you can do,” Grandma said after a few moments of contemplative silence.

I swallowed as I nodded, breathing shallowly as I ran my finger across the seat of the pew and made a patch of clover grow straight from the wood. I looked up, raising a hand toward the domed ceiling as a spray of flowering vines snaked themselves across the mural covering the ceiling.

“What else?”

I balled my hand into a fist, then opened it, showing her the sphere of pure light that I sent up toward the ceiling, letting it pop and shower over us like confetti.

“What else?”

“I could destroy this place,” I said in a whisper, locking my gaze on hers.

She nodded in understanding. Maybe she could see the memories in my mind of how I used my powers on Slate, burning the flesh from his face. Maybe she could see how I'd sent a blast of light and fire through the Vampire King's castle.

"I can open portals to other realms," I said in conclusion.

She eyed me closely, then gave me a tight nod.

"I opened a portal from the realm of the vampires to our own, twice. I'm afraid one of the portals is still open. I don't know how to close it. I don't know... I don't know how I did it the first time."

"Show me," she whispered.