

Kings Breeder 611

Chapter 611 : Breles has Fallen

Lena

The midwife handed me a black and white length of glossy paper with a smile before turning to leave the exam room. Mom was talking to a nurse in the corner of the room as I pulled my sweater down over my belly and huffed a breath, wincing as I struggled into a sitting position.

I looked down at the length of pictures in my lap, my throat tightening painfully as I tried to swallow.

There she was, our baby. I could just make out her head and body in the blurred, somewhat distorted images. I was four months along and doing fine, from what the midwife had said. Nothing looked amiss.

I hadn't mentioned to her that three of those months had been the equivalent of two weeks in the other realm. But Mom had held my hand through the appointment, her eyes on the screen as she nodded and asked quiet, gentle questions. She was gathering every ounce of information being fed to us, because I barely heard any of it. I was disassociating, my mind far away, my thoughts lingering on the man who should have been here to see the first glimpses of our daughter.

Mom probably thought I was just tired, which was true. I'd spent the last two days training with my Grandma from the crack of dawn to the late hours of the evening. Two days was all it had taken for me to get a grip on how to use each of my powers, and to discover a few new ones. Grandma had been stoic and calm throughout the ordeal, barely batting an eyelash as I shot blasts of white moonlight from my fingertips and opened portal after portal to realms of my own creation, which were little more than air and starlight.

"You ready?" Mom asked as she shrugged on her coat. I'd been looking out the window, lost in thought. I hadn't realized the nurse had left the room until mom's voice chimed in my ears. "You're probably hungry. I was thinking we could stop by the tea shop on the way home and have some lunch."

I mustered a smile. Of course, I could eat. That was the one thing I felt like I was capable of doing most of the time. Otherwise, I was a tangled mess of grief and anxiety, just waiting for my first shred of bad news to come my way.

I'd received one letter from Xander since he and Oliver left for Breles, almost three weeks ago now. He'd been brief, to the point. He'd made promises that I knew in my heart he'd be unlikely to keep.

The news coming from the west wasn't good at all. I was trying not to think about it.

I walked a few paces behind Mom as we made our way through the hospital. She looked around, smiling, and nodded at people as we passed. She held the door open for me, and a gust of cool, early spring air washed over us. Outside, the snow was still thick but turning to slush, rotting away with each passing hour.

"That was a long appointment," Mom breathed as I tucked my hand in the crook of her elbow. "You know, back when Maeve was pregnant with the triplets, this place was a four-room clinic. Now it rivals the hospital in Mirage in size." She turned her head to look back at the white, four-story hospital.

"I'm not going to be delivering the baby here, am I?" I asked, but in reality, I already knew the answer.

“I don’t know, honey. I... it depends. I’d like to get you home, to Mirage.”

I nodded, swallowing against the painful lump in my throat that wouldn’t go away—go home, go back to Mirage.

Only if Mirage was still standing.

We walked through town toward the city center, which was arranged in a circle with shops and apartment buildings creating a wide open space in the center. Festivals and markets were held here quite often, but today, it was rather quiet. We trudged through puddles of cold water as we walked across the space toward the tea shop. A flickering open sign welcomed us as we stepped inside.

“You sit down. I’ll order us some lunch,” Mom said as she unwound her scarf and started toward the counter.

I watched her for a moment before sitting at a cafe table near the window looking out over the city center. Children in rain boots were jumping into the puddles, which were the size of small ponds. Sasha was one of the children, her blonde pigtails bouncing as she jumped up and down in the water, her cheeks pink with chill.

I looked around, scanning the area for her mother. Clare walked into view, then turned and met my eye as though she’d felt my presence nearby. She gave me a smirk then started toward the tea shop.

“Great,” I said beneath my breath, just as Mom set down two tea cups of milky, extra sweet tea on the table.

Clare walked into the shop, smiling kindly at Mom as she walked to the counter. She looked at me over her shoulder, giving me a teasing grin. I didn’t understand Clare. One minute, she was cold, and the next, she acted like we were old friends.

I brought the tea to my lips as Clare ordered something at the counter. Mom watched me staring at Clare, her brow furrowed.

“What’s the matter?”

“I don’t think I like her very much,” I whispered into my tea.

Mom gave me a knowing glance before looking outside where a group of people were passing by.

“I don’t think she cares whether or not you like her,” Mom said with a soft grin, shaking her head. “She reminds me of your aunt.”

“Maeve?”

“Yes, and Kacidra. Maybe a mix of the two.”

“Hey,” Clare exhaled as she plopped down in the open seat at our table, a steaming cup of what smelled like hot chocolate in her hands. She sipped it, sighing into her cup before she set it down. “It’s freezing out there. I don’t know how you all manage this place.”

“Sasha seems to be fine,” I quipped.

Clare shrugged, and Mom smiled.

“Kids are impervious to the cold,” Mom laughed, leaning back in her chair and crossing her legs. “We used to spend at least an hour bundling you kids up, only to find your jackets and gloves at the end of the gate at your grandparents’ old house, and the lot of you out causing chaos somewhere.”

Clare was watching Sasha through the window with a distant look in her eyes.

“What happened in Cedar Hollow?” I said, a little sharper than I meant to.

Clare’s eyes snapped to my face, and Mom sucked in her breath. Clare brought her hot chocolate to her lips slowly, looking me up and down. Outside, Sasha was running and jumping with a group of five or six children now, likely her new classmates, watched over like a hawk by a group of three people who must have been their teachers.

“Does it matter?” Clare asked, and I nodded.

Her nostrils flared as she set her mug down and squared her shoulders. “I was coming back to the castle with Sasha when the attack began. We’d stopped for dinner after her playdate, and she’d fallen asleep on my shoulder on the walk home. I think... I think that was the reason we’re alive, honestly. I was slow carrying her weight, and when that screeching began I just... I looked up to the bluff and saw the castle go up in flames. People started running into the woods from behind us, and I got knocked to the ground with Sasha in my arms.” She swallowed, then lifted her hot chocolate to her lips again, shaking her head.

“Sasha started wailing. She was scared, woken up by the panic going on around us and then the fall. That’s when a... whatever they were—those things just started coming out of nowhere, walking out of thin air right behind us. I barely had time to get to my feet before they were on us. They’d heard Sasha, and they were going after anything that made noise. I ran with her as far as I could, but everyone was running in different directions. I dropped her again, tripping over someone who had fallen in front of us. It was chaos. Someone else fell on top of me, and I screamed at Sasha to run, and she did.”

And then I’d found her, just before the winged hybrid plucked me from the ground and through whatever portal they’d opened with their bloodstones.

“Then I saw... wolves, but they weren’t people who had shifted, no. They were like... spirits, like glowing ribbons of light.” She narrowed her eyes at mine before continuing, “I’m assuming those were your wolves, right?”

I nodded. That was one power I hadn’t been able to summon again when training with my grandma.

“I searched everywhere for her. I thought maybe she’d gone back to the castle, so I went there and... Goddess, it was gone. The whole thing burnt to the foundation. I didn’t even think that Hale was in the castle until I couldn’t find him again when I went into the village looking for Sasha. Everything was gone, Lena. The village was ashes. I screamed and cried for Sasha and my brother until I lost my

voice. I barely remember being led out of the village and to the bus station. I just woke up on a bus and had to be held down until we reached Red Lakes.”

“And then you came here—” Mom began, but Clare exhaled loudly, shaking her head as she tried to gather her thoughts.

"I came here because I knew that Rosalie was the only one who could help me find Sasha. I knew that Lena wouldn't have abandoned her. I knew Sasha would be with Lena, or Adrian."

"And you came here because you're Lycennian, as well." Mom tipped her teacup back, draining it. I was shocked by the look on her face, which was cold and suspicious. I'd never seen her look at anyone like that before. "You look like him," she said flatly, meeting Clare's eye.

"Like who?" I asked, my heart skipping a beat.

Clare swallowed hard, tearing her eyes from Mom's to meet mine.

"I didn't know," she ground out, fury blazing behind her eyes. She pointed a finger at mom with a sneer. "And your family interrogated me for days trying to pry answers out of me, answers I didn't have."

"Didn't know what?" I asked, feeling helpless as I looked between Clare and Mom.

"Clare is Carl's daughter," Mom said simply, draining my tea, which I hadn't touched in a long time.

"I never knew him. I didn't know his name—"

"Her mother was a Lycennian refugee that crossed through Winter Forest when Maeve and I were here, before the triplets were born. Her mother's name was on the register. We checked."

I'd heard of Carl, the only one of Tasia's accomplices that had made it out of the moonstone drama alive. But he hadn't been seen in over twenty years.

"I have nothing to do with Lycenna. I told you everything I know," Clare said hotly, and my mom nodded, shrugging casually.

I felt my stomach twist into a knot as a disgusting thought crept into my mind. I tasted bile as I looked up at Clare, noting the crimson shade on her cheeks. Lycenna used to selectively breed their women to strengthen the powers passed down by Lycaon. It wasn't uncommon for cousins, or brothers and sisters to, uh....

"Carl is not Sasha's father," Clare said, as if reading the expression on my face. "His name was—"

A warrior burst through the tea shop door, scanning the room before he settled his frantic gaze on the three of us. He bowed to Mom, then said breathlessly, "Queen Hanna, you're being requested at the castle—"

"What's going on?" Mom said as she rose to her feet, her face shadowed with concern.

"Breles has fallen," he replied, his eyes glazing with fear.

Chapter 612 : A Losing Battle

Xander

Adrian was pacing along the railing of the auxiliary ship taking us back to Breles. It had been a month since I'd left Lena behind in Winter Forest, and other than a letter I'd written and mailed to Winter Forest before I'd left for the portal back to my realm, I hadn't spoken to her since.

The ship was as full as possible with warriors from my territory, with more on the way. Adrian and I had gathered the entire force of my warriors, ten thousand strong. A portion of that would be guarding the portal to our realm from both sides if worse came to worst and the pack lands lost their hold on their territories. The rest had been ordered to stay back to guard their own people. As much as I wanted to help in this realm, I couldn't risk letting anything happen to my own people which I was sworn to protect.

Costas had told me his estimation of the number of warriors King Nikolas had at his disposal.

It was a lot more than ten thousand.

I gripped the railing of the boat as we towered above the water. The Isles of Denali rose above the water in the distance, glimmering like emeralds against a blanket of turquoise and sapphire. When I'd left Breles, I'd heard Prince William was standing in as Alpha while Troy and his Beta, Keaton, commanded their warriors as the armies of the Alphas began to push further west. Hybrids had been attacking at night in the rural villages when I left, going far enough to destroy several villages completely. I prayed nothing much had changed, or that it had changed for the better, since we left for reinforcements.

Charlie walked up beside me. He rested his elbows on the railing, the wind ruffling his brown curls that glinted as red as port wine in the sun.

"We'll make landfall in Breles around dusk at this rate," he said with a sigh.

"Any news from the mainland?" I asked.

He was quiet for a moment, his gaze clouded by concern.

"Breles is the last stronghold in the south, and our forces are holding on to the territory. But everything west of it—up to the border of northern Finadli and the mountain territories—those have fallen."

"Fallen?"

"Overrun."

I chewed on the inside of my lower lip, turning away from him to look out over the water. I couldn't fathom the loss of life. I couldn't even come close to imagining the destruction.

"The Alpha King of the West and the Alphas of the north have their armies situated on the border of the northern territories. So far they've been able to hold the beasts back."

I nodded, no immediate reply forming on the tip of my tongue. I needed to find a way to reach out to Gideon. He was adamant about staying in Crimson Creek, where a small force had accumulated to stem the flow of hybrids coming through the portal, but they were useless against the temporary breaks between the realm the king was creating using the bloodstones he was using slaves to mine.

They wouldn't have stood a chance against an onslaught of the vampire warriors under King Nikolas's control, however. Those gray, molted, lifeless undead had no feelings of fear. I'd fought them off when we broke Lena out of the castle. I'd looked into their eyes—nothing. There was nothing there but death.

"What about from your family?" I asked.

Charlie smirked, meeting my gaze.

“You mean Lena? Your mate?”

“Y-yes,” I stammered, shaking my head.

“No news is good news,” he replied, clapping me on the shoulder before he turned and walked away.

Adrian came up to my side, watching Charlie retreat into the depths of the massive boat made for war.

“What are we getting into when we get to Breles?” he asked.

“One last stand,” I replied with a sigh, watching as the sun hung lazily over the Isles as we passed.

Troy pointed to a map in the center of the table beneath a wide canvas tent, his face covered in grime and dried blood. Keaton and Rowan leaned to look down at the map, squinting in the flickering lantern light.

“Here, and here. Another hive was discovered here, this morning,” Troy breathed, his voice laced with exhaustion.

I licked dry lips, shaking my head as the sounds of battle ricocheted through the tent. Explosions went off every few minutes, echoing through the sprawling metropolis of Breles, which stretched for miles. The vampires were right on the edge of the city now, trying to push in, but were being held back by our forces.

But there was a shift in the battle tonight. While Troy pointed to what they had been calling “hives,” which were groups of vampires who had taken cover during daylight hours in the remains of the outer neighborhoods in Breles, I had a sinking feeling in my gut that it wouldn’t matter. Taking out the known hives in the daylight meant we had to make it through the night.

And with every passing minute, that seemed more and more unlikely.

Rowan heaved a breath. He met my eye, his expression telling me we’d been thinking the same thing.

“My forces are ready—” I began, but Troy waved his hand as he sighed and reached up to run his hands through his filthy hair.

Rowan shifted his weight, then leaned forward with his hands resting on the table. His eyes moved from the map to my face, where they fixed on my own. “If we lose our hold on Breles,” he said with a tremble in his voice, “your forces will be needed to defend Valoria.”

His words echoed through my mind, slicing me to my core. The look in the eyes of the men standing before me, kings of their lands, told me everything I needed to know about what was going to happen tonight.

An explosion shook the tent, which was in the center of the war camp. We were near the edge of the city, only a mile away from where the combined forces of the pack lands were battling with the vampires trying to lay waste to Breles.

Wolves ran by in suits of armor, followed by warriors decked out in spears and knives, some made of wood. Rowan had listened to me then. He'd really listened when I told him everything I knew about their realm and their ways—their strengths, and most importantly, their weaknesses.

I hadn't been in the front lines, not yet. We'd only arrived an hour and half before and were immediately escorted here, to the tent where the Alphas and Betas were gathering to discuss their next moves.

Adrian was currently with our forces, awaiting my instruction.

I realized, as I met the eyes of Troy, Keaton, and Rowan, that those instructions wouldn't be more than surviving the night.

"This is it," Troy breathed, looking from Keaton to Rowan with a tight nod.

"We'll pull our forces back, have them hold strong in the city center," Rowan said, pointing to the map.

"Torch the outer neighborhoods," Troy added, running his finger across the map, a distant look in his eyes.

Torch the neighborhoods?

I knew the city had been evacuated several weeks ago, but still, the idea of laying waste to the entire territory was unfathomable.

"When morning comes, and they seek shelter, they'll do so here, and here, possibly here," Rowan continued, dark circles lining his eyes. "That is where we'll hit them—"

"They're going to keep coming," I interrupted.

The men looked up at me, their eyes dark and weary from lack of sleep. "You clear out one group of his warriors and more will take their place by nightfall!"

Troy leaned back, crossing his arms over his chest.

I shook my head, looking down at the map and scanning it for Crimson Creek. If I could get there... if I could get my forces there, even just a group of my best warriors....

If I could get back through the portal and finish the job. Kill the king....

I eyed each man for a moment before I turned on my heel and walked out of the tent. Night was choking the city. Generators powered the camp, but that was it. The towering buildings of downtown Breles stood like pillars of shadow as I turned my head toward the front line. Fire blazed in the distance, and muffled shouts of frustration, fury, and terror sent a vibration through the war camp.

Wolves and warriors in their human forms were either sprinting to replace those fighting in the front lines or tending to the injured, or asleep where they'd come to a stop. I stepped over a trio of wolves sprawled out in the mud, still in their armor, fast asleep where they lay. It was madness, and my stomach was in knots by the time I reached the corner of the camp, where our forces from Egoren had been stationed with barely enough room for my men to lay down on the sodden earth beneath windblown tents.

Ash covered everything. The smell of the sick, dying, and dead hung in the air as I passed several medic tents. Charlie had told me about the blood that had been sent down from Winter Forest. Even a drop of Queen Rosalie's blood was enough to heal flesh wounds and the like. But some of the injuries I saw as I passed by were... horrific, absolutely gruesome. I turned away from the tent as a blood-soaked medic placed a sodden sheet over the body of one of his patients.

Adrian was standing outside one of the canvas tents, his eyes heavy as he spoke with two men I recognized as John and Colton, two of our greatest warriors with specialized combat training. They bowed their heads briefly as I walked up, turning to leave. Adrian ran his fingers through his hair and nodded in my direction, his shoulders slumping.

"Looks like we showed up late to the game," he groaned.

"A losing game," I breathed, peering through the tent flap at the warriors who were going through their packs and readying for their next command. None of them had been out of our realm before, and the journey here had been incredible for them, I had no doubt of it. But when the ship pulled into Breles, everything changed. The sallow, wasted looks on their faces cut through my soul as I pulled Adrian aside.

"I'm taking five men and going to Crimson Creek," I said. Adrian, to my surprise, didn't argue. He didn't say anything as I continued, "You need to stay here and keep our men out of the battle that's going to take place tonight."

"What? Why?"

I exhaled, nostrils flaring as I looked around to make sure we weren't overheard.

"This is it, okay? Breles is going to fall—tonight. There are too many vampires pushing against the front line. The Alphas are going to pull that line back to the city center and torch the outskirts of the city come daybreak."

"But if the city center falls as well—"

"I know. Be ready to get our men out. There's already talk of sending them to Valoria, to Mirage. If King Nikolas is able to invade Valoria—" Bile rose in my throat at the thought, and I shook my head, unable to finish the sentence.

"I understand," Adrian nodded, his blue eyes piercing mine for a long moment.

"If I don't come back," I said, reaching into my inner jacket pocket and placing a piece of paper in Adrian's hand, "take Lena back to Egoren. You'll be the Alpha until our daughter is old enough to rule."

Adrian gripped the letter in his hand as I clapped him on the shoulder. I turned toward the tent, grinding my teeth as I strode inside to pick which warriors would be following me into what I was sure was certain, unavoidable death.

Chapter 613 : Breles Destroyed

Xander

It was full night now, and the sounds of battle were echoing through the desolate streets as I followed three armor-clad wolves through the outskirts of Breles, followed by John and Colton, the three of us still in our human forms and decked out in knives, swords, and spears.

In some ways, wolves were at a disadvantage against the vampires. Vampires were fast and agile, and could easily subdue even the fastest wolf. But wolves had an advantage—their senses. They would sniff out the hives, and their sense of sight was far superior to the vampires, even in the dark.

While in battle, the warriors were working in teams, one man assigned to one warrior in their wolf form. The wolves would draw out the vampires, and their partners would finish the job with their wooden blades and spears.

It was a messy business, and hundreds if not thousands of the allied forces had been killed.

We were lurking in the shadows of the commercial buildings near the front lines. The three wolves guiding us through the dark were only a few paces in front of us, their noses working overtime as they led us around the main battle, away from the conflict.

I wasn't sure how much farther we had to travel before we reached the edge of the city. Once we reached the open fields outside of Breles, once dedicated to farmland that was little more than ash now, we'd ride on the backs of the three wolves all the way to Crimson Creek.

I'd chosen my best warriors for this reason, those strong and hearty wolves who were trained for endurance rather than technique in combat. John and Colton were an example of my warriors who had hand-to-hand, or snout-to-snout, combat experience and training. In their wolf forms, they were lean and agile. But their real power was in their human forms, each of them quick-footed and capable with a variety of weapons. I needed every skill set imaginable to make it to Crimson Creek.

The group of wolves halted abruptly and we nearly tripped over them. They turned around, snarling at the darkened alleyway behind us as frantic footsteps echoed through the narrow space.

I raised my hand to command the wolves to settle as Oliver approached.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I growled in a low whisper. Oliver clapped me on the shoulder, leaning at the waist to catch his breath.

"I'm going with you."

"No. I'm not risking you, Oliver. You're one of the princes—"

"Do you think I give a f**k? Adrian and I have made the journey to Crimson Creek before, remember, when you got swooped up by that winged beast? You guys have no f*****g clue where you're going, but I do. I'm not arguing about this. I'm going."

I swallowed back the retort as one wolf's ears pricked up and it turned its head to the side, snout sniffing the air.

"We need to move," the wolf said through the mind-link, and I nodded.

The wolves began to move forward again with us following behind, Oliver walking nearly shoulder to shoulder with me as he glanced back at John and Colton, sizing them up.

“Lots of big boys in Egoren, huh?” Oliver joked, having to crane his neck to get a full view of John. John was taller than me by two inches, and I was an exceedingly tall man already.

“Shut up,” I hissed, and Oliver snorted, turning toward the darkened street we were sneaking along.

We walked for a few more blocks before the wolves came to an abrupt stop again.

I felt the presence of the vampire before I saw them, a group of four or five running out of a shopfront with their cloaks trailing in their wake. One of them stopped and looked right at us, his elongated fangs gleaming in the moonlight. The wolves stood guard in front of the four of us in our human forms, and behind me I heard John, Colton, and Oliver unsheath their blades.

The vampires were on us in a blur of movement. The wolves scattered as they were told to do in this situation, running wide circles around the vampires to disorient them and cause them to chase.

Oliver sprung into action before my warriors stepped a single step forward, his red hair gleaming like embers in the moonlight as he bellowed, jumping into the air and slamming his full weight into the closest vampire.

I saw his blade slice through the vampire’s neck, then Oliver drove it through the vampire’s heart. The vampire turned into a heap of ash and clothing as Oliver got to his feet and moved onto his next victim.

I followed suit, throwing myself into one of the vampires. My target had more fight in him, however, and knocked the first wooden blade out of my hand before I could use it on him. I reared back, stumbling as the vampire snarled, his teeth dripping with silvery saliva.

I unsheathed the sword that was hanging heavy at my waist. The air swooshed around it as I swung it through the night, pointing it at the vampire. The vampire smirked, actually smirked as it took a step forward and ran a finger along the blade.

I pulled the sword back and swung with all my might, but I missed as the vampire jumped out of the way, his speed too great. Thus began what felt like a long, drawn-out dance as I battled with the vampire. John and Colton were battling with another exceedingly stealthy vampire behind me, and

Oliver.... He’d gone completely feral as he took on two more vampires that had joined the fray. The three wolves had herded them back to back, and Oliver leaped toward them, a blade in each hand.

I swung blindly at the vampire before me, this time slicing through his arm. He hissed in pain, screeching as his severed arm fell to the ground. I swung again, grunting with effort as I brought the sword across his neck.

He fell, headless, his body dissolving into ash as I sheathed the sword and turned to where John and Colton were subduing their foe. Colton delivered the final, deathly blow with a wooden blade through the vampire’s back.

I turned to Oliver, panting as I watched him and the wolves tear into the two vampires, and in a blink of an eye, the vampires disappeared into heaps of clothing, ashes spreading on the pavement.

Oliver wiped his brow, trailing ash and vampire blood, black as ink, across his face. He turned to us and smiled, shrugging his shoulders.

“He’s an animal,” John panted.

“He’s insane,” I corrected as I started forward, stepping over what was left of the vampires as I made my way toward Oliver and the wolves. “Come on. We have a ways to go.”

“They’ll be hiding out in these villages,” Oliver whispered as he unrolled the map he’d taken from his father’s tent, which showed us the whole of Findali. His finger moved along the now abandoned central highway through southern Findali, stretched from the port of Breles all the way toward Crimson Creek and up to Morhan.

I nodded as I squatted down to get a better look at the map. We were sheltered by the tall, dry grasses that grow along the highway, roughly a mile from where the battle was still taking place on the outskirts of Breles. I could see the fire burning along the edge of the city from where we sat in the grass. It was the only thing holding off the full force of the vampire army from rushing the city all at once.

It had been several hours since we left the war camp. Getting through the city had been slow going and difficult, and our group had battled an astounding number of vampires before we reached the rolling, grassy fields.

We were safe where we rested, at least for now.

What we were waiting for tore at my soul, however.

“We’ll make it to Crimson Creek by dusk if we don’t stop,” Oliver continued, glancing up from the map to meet my eye. “Unless...”

“Unless we stop at each village and destroy the hives,” I breathed, nodding.

Another wave of vampire warriors would have come through the portal sometime during the night, and would be making their way to Breles to replace those lost in the current battle. If they couldn’t make it by dawn, they’d have to hide out in the evacuated villages that bordered the highway.

We had a chance to stop them from ever making it to Breles.

“We have no way to tell how many are headed this way,” Colton said, his golden brown skin glinting in the moonlight as he crouched next to Oliver. “We could be up against thousands.”

“And thousands more would be coming by the time the sun goes down,” John added, letting out his breath as he reached up to remove the hood that covered his curly blonde hair.

“We need to get to the portal they’re coming through,” Oliver breathed, tapping the map. “I can close it. I’m sure I can.”

He’d mentioned this to me before. He’d never tried it, but he was certain he shared some of the powers Lena possessed.

Lena—the thought of her drifted into my mind, my heart quickening. I hated having to leave her. If it hadn't been for the f*****g book, she'd be here with me. I knew that much. She wasn't some delicate flower. She was powerful, willful, and she wasn't afraid. Even Abigail was in Breles, helping out in any way she could.

The distance between Lena and I was chipping away at me. The only thing keeping me sane was the will to survive this hell we were in.

The sky was beginning to turn a muted violet as the stars began to fade. Dawn was approaching, and in the distance we heard the vampire army begin to screech to their counterparts, no doubt announcing one final, violent push forward into the city.

They were going to take over this continent in the name of the king. They couldn't open up portals wherever they wanted. Their only tie was to Crimson Creek. But, if the king's army could make it over the sea...

They'd overwhelm the smaller, more populous territories to the east.

A cracking sound echoed behind us. Horns sounded in the distance, alerting the allied army to retreat.

"It's happening," Oliver said, turning his head to look toward Breles.

The screeching got louder as our warriors retreated. I held my breath as explosions ripped through the city. The allied forces had planted explosives around the outskirts of downtown Breles, and as their warriors retreated to the city center, they brought the rest of the city down with them, leaving nowhere for the vampires to hide from the sun as it began to rise.

And the sun did rise, the only constant in this equation. The screeching hit a peak, turning from menacing, violent noise to pained cries as the sunrise turned the sky a pale pink.

"Let's get moving," Oliver said, his voice distorted by the sounds of the once great city of Breles, the territory of a pack that had been there for centuries dissolving into rubble.

I turned toward the horizon as the sun lifted into the sky, giving us a full day to make it to Gideon.

We need help, Lena, I said through the bond as if she was close enough to feel it, or even hear it.

Chapter 614 : Stronger Together

Lena

"We're going home," Mom said as she riffled through the dresser in her bedroom at the castle in Winter Forest, her eyes wide, and a distant expression etched into her brow. I turned to the doorway as Maeve ran past in a blur of copper blonde hair, her footsteps retreating down the hallway.

It had been a few hours since we'd received word about what had happened in Breles. I should have felt stunned by the knowledge, but only a feeling of dread had settled in my stomach. I'd known this was coming. We all had. We'd all prepared for the worst, but it hadn't made the news any easier to swallow.

"Where's Dad?" I asked, my throat tightening around the words. Mom shook her head, her eyes misting with tears for a moment before she cleared her throat.

"I don't know," she said, and that was all she could manage to say. She cleared her throat, sniffing as she folded a sweater and tucked it into her suitcase. "We need to go back and rule, and prepare for... prepare for whatever is coming next."

This morning I'd been at my ultrasound appointment. By nightfall, we were in a full state of panic as news began to pour in from the west about what had happened in Breles. Now, we were preparing to go home... home—to Mirage, back to the Castle Drogomor where I'd been born and raised. I hadn't been home since the middle of summer at least.

It wouldn't be a happy homecoming. I sucked in my breath at the thought of walking through those halls while Dad was away at war, unreachable, if he was even... Goddess, I couldn't even say it.

Breles was gone. Just gone. Nothing left but rubble and ash. Those allied forces that had been able to escape when the vampire army pushed into the city had fled to the port.

The port was all that was left. Boats full of warriors were headed east to defend the Isles and Valoria in the event the vampires were able to cross the sea.

"Xander," I whispered under my breath, my heart tying into a knot as I turned from where my mother was packing her suitcase to the doorway. I began to walk out of the room, moving like a ghost as my mind reeled. I had to get to him. I had to find him. I couldn't just go home, not now. I had to close that portal.

This was my fault. That portal I'd opened and failed to close was allowing these creatures to enter our realm in unending droves and leave nothing but death and destruction in their wake.

"Where are you going?" Mom asked, and I turned around, tearfully looking toward her as I opened my mouth to tell her that I was sorry, that I'd see her again, hopefully soon. "No," she said firmly as if reading my mind. "Lena, no—"

"I have to finish this. I should have ended this long ago. I didn't know how, but I do now—"

"Stop," she commanded, and I felt my body go rigid at her tone.

"I have to do this—"

"You were given that book for a reason, Lena," she said as she pressed her weight into the suitcase, zipping it up. "We're meeting with Mara in Mirage—you, me, Clare, and Maeve. Your grandma too, if she can spare the time with everything else going on. We're going to figure this out!"

"It's too late for that!" I snapped, tears rolling down my cheeks. "We're too late. Whatever magic we were supposed to use, whatever we were supposed to uncover... it's too late. This only ends if... if I bring down their realm."

Mom straightened up slowly, her eyes holding my gaze with an intensity that almost brought me to my knees.

"I have to take their realm apart. I know I can. I have to at least try."

"No—"

“This is who I am!” I cried, cutting her off before she could protest. “I never wanted this. I tried to hide from what and who I was, and look at what I’ve done, Mom. Look at what I’ve caused—”

“You didn’t do this—”

“But I did!” I felt my heart shattering into pieces as I pleaded for her to understand. “I made it to their realm. I had a chance to kill the Vampire King. I failed because I didn’t know how to use my powers. I didn’t train them like I should have. I didn’t let any of you help me figure out who I was and what I could do. The blood of those warriors is on my hands, Mom. I could’ve stopped this. I could’ve stopped this from the beginning!”

She just stared at me, shaking her head.

“This is the reason I was born. I’m meant to be the protector of our realm. I need to be that person now.” I needed to save our people, all of them, and I had two options.

I could go through the portal in the old temple, back to Andromeda’s lands. From there, I could access the realm of the vampires. It was risky, and I didn’t know for sure if the portal to Andromeda’s coven even worked that way, or if it was only an exit instead of a revolving door.

My second option was more difficult, but was the most likely to work.

I stepped backward through the doorway. She straightened up, staring wide eyed at me.

“Don’t,” she whispered with force. “Lena—”

I had to go to the garden realm I’d created as a child, the same one I’d inadvertently trapped Xander in several months ago now. He’d told me about the... infection, in my garden realm. Blood root had seeped through the barriers of the realms like the Vampire King had been looking for me there. The injuries Jen had given me during the attack that left me fevered and forever scarred had linked me and my powers to the vampire realm, maybe forever.

The king would find me here. He’d find Winter Forest, and my family. It was only a matter of time.

And then there was Xander, who had also been injured by Jen and given blood root to aid in his recovery. How long would it be until the vampire king found Egoren and laid waste to Xander’s people—the very people I would one day call my own?

While training with my grandma, I’d perfected opening and closing portals of my creation. I could go to my garden realm, and then go through the same portal Xander had fallen through when he’d come upon Henry and taken shelter in his cave. From there, I’d go to the king. I knew his castle would be nearby. I’d seen the pointed peaks when we’d escaped the castle the day Xander and Oliver came to my rescue after my plan to kill the king had failed. I knew how to get back there, which routes to follow.

I’d kill the king. I’d annihilate his armies. I’d seal the portal. Then, I’d tear down their realm.

Mom was waiting for me to do or say something. We were just looking at each other now, neither of us speaking as I decided what route to take to get back to the realm of the vampires.

Down the hallway, I heard a shocked gasp, then muffled anguish. Mom rushed out into the hallway as I turned my head in the direction the voices were coming from, several of them.

Maeve's voice cut through the air, frantic and pleading as Grandpa's stern response followed.

"What's going on?" Mom asked beneath her breath, more to herself than to me. She rushed past me down the corridor and out onto the landing, leaning over the railing to look down into the foyer.

I followed, my fingertips prickling with adrenaline as I caught up to her. Maeve was pacing back and forth below us, pointing an accusatory finger at Grandpa.

"I'm going there now," she ground out, her lips pulled back in a snarl. "I am the Luna of Poldesse—"

"You're also my daughter," Grandpa ground out. "And I'm not allowing you to barrel into a warzone unaccompanied."

"Maeve—" Grandma tried to cut in, but Maeve was red with fury as she walked between her parents and stormed outside, not bothering to put a coat on. Mom hurried down the stairs, looking toward my grandparents for an explanation for Maeve's outburst. Grandma only shook her head, swallowing hard as she looked down at her feet.

"What happened?" I asked as I walked down the stairs.

"Oliver is missing. Again," Grandpa deadpanned with a shrug. "He stole a map from your uncle Troy and left on foot headed toward the front lines."

"Where was he going?" I asked with an arch of my brow. I had a feeling I knew exactly where he was going. Gooseflesh prickled over my arms as I looked toward the front door. If Maeve was going to Breles... maybe I wouldn't need to jump through endless hoops to get back to the vampire realm. I could go straight to the source, and end things there, in Crimson Creek.

I glanced at Mom before sprinting toward the door, throwing it open wide as I hurried down the steps after Maeve. I screamed her name, and she came to a halt along the trail leading toward the village.

"Go back inside, Lena."

"I'm going with you," I replied, a little breathless. Maeve began to shake her head, but then stopped, looking me up and down. "I can fight. I can still use my powers."

"You're pregnant, Lena."

"So? You were pregnant when you went on that big adventure to save the world from Tasia—so was Mom, with me!"

She exhaled, looking up at the castle, where the front door was open and the darkened figures of my mom and grandparents stood in the doorway. Maeve's eyes glimmered for a moment, her initial panic fading and then ceasing altogether.

"Go get your mom and tell her we're leaving now. All of us. We need to go get Clare, and then we're going to Mirage to fetch Mara. If we're going to do this, we're going to do it right. And we're going to do it right away."

I fought the urge to grin like a little girl and gave her a tight nod before turning around and walking briskly back toward the castle.

“We need to go to Mirage. We can’t wait,” I said, panting a bit as I grabbed the railing leading up the steps to the front door. “You,” I said, directing my voice toward Mom, “and you too, Grandma.”

“What about me?” Grandpa said, and I turned my gaze to his, noticing the playful gleam flutter across his face.

“This is for witches only, Ethan,” Grandma said as she squeezed his hand.

“So you admit it after all these years?” His voice drifted away as Grandma and Grandpa turned into the house, walking away together. Mom looked down at me from her spot on the porch, her eyes glistening in the porchlight.

“Mom,” I began, but she only shook her head.

“Let us help you do this. That’s all I ask. That’s all I’ve been asking, all your life. You were never meant to face your powers alone.”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I will. I’ll... I don’t want to put any of you at risk. I don’t want to hurt you again.”

“Lena,” she breathed, extending a hand to me. I heard Maeve’s crunching footsteps behind me as she came back to the castle, mumbling something about calling for someone to ready a plane to take us to Valoria. “Let’s finish packing,” Mom said quietly, eyeing Maeve as she passed us.

I walked back into the castle behind them and made for the stairs. I heard Grandpa in the sitting room off the foyer, talking on the phone to what must have been a pilot as he explained what needed to happen. Grandma disappeared into the library, and Mom and Maeve walked a few paces behind me as I walked up the stairs toward my room.

“What were you going to do, Maeve?” Mom asked, her voice lifting playfully. “Swim all the way to Breles?”

Maeve grunted, laughing under her breath. Mom made a little noise in her throat as I turned my head to glance at them, noticing Maeve nudging her with her elbow.

I parted with them on the landing and walked to my room. I didn’t have much to pack, not at all. All of the clothes I’d been wearing had been bought in Winter Forest after we’d arrived through the portal.

I was closer than I’d been in weeks to seeing Xander again.

There was just one more thing to do, and now, I didn’t have to do it alone.

Chapter 615 : Ally in Crimson Creek

Xander

Fire. It was everywhere. And out of the fire currently ripping through one of the many small, abandoned villages we’d passed on our way to Crimson Creek, Oliver was sprinting toward us, his mouth opened wide as he sucked in his breath.

A wall of flames rushed toward us, barreling through the dry, dead winter grass like a book of matches on the outskirts of the village. Whatever vampires had been hiding from the sun within the half-dozen buildings would be no match for the absolute hell Oliver had just unleashed.

“You’re on fire,” John said, waving a casual hand at Oliver, who was indeed on fire.

Oliver dropped to the ground, rolling across the grass until the flames that had been licking up his pant legs sent a trail of acrid smoke toward the sky.

This wasn’t the first time Oliver had caught himself on fire today, and it likely wouldn’t be the last. We were only an hour outside of Crimson Creek at this point, and we had burned six villages and two larger towns down to the foundation since the sun came up this morning.

It was unfortunate. I hated it. But, it had to be done. If we killed every hive hiding out along the highway, well, our warriors back in Breles might stand a chance of holding onto the city for one more night, and that was all that mattered at the moment.

But daylight was fading into an overcast afternoon. In a few hours, it would be dark enough for a fresh round of vampire warriors to make their way through the portal and into this realm. They were fast, and a journey that had taken us nearly ten hours on foot would take them half the time.

Oliver jumped to his feet, turning around to survey the damage he’d inflicted on the village. Screeching cut through the air, then faded into the crackling flames and splintering buildings as the fire ate away at the village and everything that had been taking shelter within the walls.

Oliver clapped his hands together, a wild look in his eyes. I’d underestimated him. He was the scrappiest son of a b***h I’d ever met in my life.

He’d also been able to snap his fingers and create a flame, just like that.

“Nothing more than a party trick,” he’d shrugged the first time he’d done it.

We’d all been stunned, but hadn’t had an opportunity to say anything about it before Oliver was skipping toward the first village, burning it to the ground within minutes.

“Something is wrong with this family,” Colton breathed.

“Probably,” I said beneath my breath before turning to face our three comrades who were still in their wolf forms.

We moved on to the final two villages along the highway, letting Oliver do his worst. I’d grown accustomed to the painful screeching of the dying vampires over the course of the day, and by the time we reached the final stop along our journey, I barely heard them at all as I instead gazed out toward the horizon, where Crimson Creek was just a glimmer in the low lying sun.

I had no idea what we’d find there. I prayed to whatever gods were listening, or at least watching for the sake of entertainment, that our friends had been spared.

We’d need them. All of them.

Because we were going into the portal to finish this.

Crimson Creek was nothing more than a black space against the rolling, barren gray hills. Blood root covered everything—every building, every sidewalk, every window and roof. The train station had blackened, oily vines growing up the sides of its awning. It had been the first time I'd seen blood root grow like vines instead of the dry, moss-like substance that was chalky and ashen. Purple flowers were budding along the vines; some of them bloomed enough to see the blood red petals inside.

I commanded my men to not touch anything as we walked through the village. Oliver was walking ahead of us like he owned the place, kicking a path through the blood root. I realized he'd just been here, after all. He'd spent nearly a month in Crimson Creek while Lena and I were in the vampire realm. He'd come through the portal that glimmered on the horizon as we turned out of the village and walked along the dirt road leading to Gideon's property.

Gideon's house was covered in blood root. The black infection seemed to suffocate the house, closing it off from the outside world completely. I exhaled in annoyance as Oliver kicked open the front door, yelling out for Alma, announcing he was "home."

But I broke into a run, weapons drawn, as a struggle ensued inside. The wolves stayed back, guarding the front door as John, Colton, and I stepped inside. Oliver was flat on his back, his fist raised to protect his face as Gideon delivered blow after blow to Oliver's torso.

"Gideon," I rasped, my eyes widening as he looked up at me. "It's us—Xander, and Oliver."

Gideon's dark eyes were unreadable, unseeing. He blinked several times, bringing his arm up to shield his eyes from the sunlight pouring in through the open front door.

"Shut it!" I hissed at John, who bristled but did as I commanded. Gideon immediately relaxed, then swayed, his body thudding to the ground.

Oliver rolled over, tucking his knees into his chest as he spit blood onto the floorboards. I rushed toward Gideon but stopped short of him as the man, a descendent of those few lower vampires who had been lucky enough to escape their realm of nightmares and slavery to settle here in Crimson Creek, bared his elongated teeth and hissed at me.

"It's me!" I said hoarsely, dropping to my knees in front of him.

"You have a f*****g death wish, Xander," Gideon growled, his eyes darting to my warriors who were standing shellshocked at the front door, weapons drawn. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Closing the portal, you piece of s**t! You cracked my tooth!" Oliver spit more blood onto the ground before reaching up to cup his jaw, which was already turning a rich shade of purple.

Gideon leaned his back against the wall, huffing a choked laugh as he narrowed his eyes at Oliver.

"Where is your family?" I asked, and Gideon's eyes darkened as he met my gaze.

"Gone. I don't know where. I'd rather not know what happened to them," he bit out, running his tongue along his teeth. I swallowed back the unease prickling over my skin and glanced over my shoulder at my warriors before turning back to Gideon.

“We came here to make sure you were okay—”

“How else would I be?” he replied dryly, crossing his ankles.

I sucked on my lower lip before squatting in front of him, leaning forward to look into his face.

“You look like hell—”

“Well, I’ve been through hell. I’m living it. Every night more and more of them come through that portal. Do you know what they are? What they used to be? They used to be like me—lower vampires, the so-called children of the Night Realm created by the God of Night so his sons and daughters could have playthings.”

“What makes them... all gray and ugly?” Oliver asked painfully, propping himself up in a seat position.

“Being fed on by the king, or each other, over decades, maybe even centuries for some of the older ones. Nothing but death, that’s what they are. Death Walkers is what our kind calls them. And there’s an endless supply of them, trust me. Whatever you plan to do, it won’t be enough. You can close that portal but they’ll open more, and more, and more. They’ll do so until their world runs out of their precious bloodstones.”

“Well, we have to do something, because we’re going to lose this entire continent to them unless we stop this now—right now, preferably.” Oliver wiped a trail of blood from his nostrils and straightened his legs out in front of him.

“A few lower vampires came through the portal when it opened. When it stayed open, that is. War is brewing on the other side. The kings of the lower vampires had banded together. I don’t know if they ever acted on their plans. That was months ago.”

“King Costas of Brune,” I said, more to myself than to anyone in the room. Gideon’s eyes flicked to mine. “I met him and Queen Kiern, I also met their son.”

“Zeke?” Gideon asked, then smiled, shaking his head.

“You know them?”

“I know of them. I’ve never been to that realm. I was born here; my parents were born here... We don’t live as long as those bastards in the Night Realm—longer days here, slower hours, you know. Sometimes lower vampires would get their hands on a bloodstone and open a break in the realm and

end up here, and tell us everything they knew. The last time that happened was a few decades ago, and we heard all about the missing prince of Brune.”

“Well, he’s not missing anymore,” Oliver cut in.

Gideon gave him a dirty look, then turned back to me.

“King Costas offered me aid,” I said. “Can I trust him?”

“I wouldn’t trust a vampire, and I am one,” he replied, crossing his arms over his chest. “But what do you have to lose at this point?”

“Nothing,” I breathed, and it was the truth.

One of the wolves called out to me through the mind-link, alerting me that it was now nearing sunset. I rose to my full height and offered my hand to Gideon. He took it, his grip weak and legs trembling a bit as he stood. He looked frail and exhausted. He noticed my concern, and exhaled deeply, nostrils flaring.

“I’ve been hiding out since Alma and my brothers went to scout for food. Last I heard, they’d run into Ben. Ben had been coming here with Bethany every once in a while, but I haven’t seen any of them in over three weeks. I’ve just been... sitting here.”

“You’re hungry?” said John behind me, shifting his weight uncomfortably.

None of my men really understood the vampires, especially the lower ones. I hadn’t had time to explain their eating habits.

Gideon glared. I let out the breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding, looking down at Gideon.

“We’re going to go in. I need you to come with us.”

“Why? You realize what’s on the other side, right? An entire army of vampires waiting for nightfall in your realm.”

“Then we go in after the army passes through Crimson Creek and travel through to the daylight hours of the Night Realm,” I offered, and Gideon at least considered this.

“Why me?”

“Because you’re the only vampire I trust,” I said honestly, a quiet plea in my voice.

“This is your realm as much as it is mine,” Oliver added, his voice dropping its usual wry tone, “Fight for it, for your home.”

Gideon ran his tongue over his dry lips, considering.

Finally, after what felt like several minutes of silent reflection, he nodded his head and pointed to the blood root covering the walls and floor. “Cover yourself in it—all of you, every inch so they can’t pick up your scent. We have roughly four hours until the army passes through. We have to stay hidden.”

Chapter 616 : Tell Her I Loved Her

Xander

We’d hatched a practically impossible plan. It was a last-ditch effort, but there was a slim chance it could buy the allied forces a full night to rest and regroup, and to hold onto Breles. Oliver was sitting next to me in Gideon’s truck as we bounced over the rolling hills on the outskirts of Crimson Creek, a massive tank of fuel jostling in the bed of the truck behind us. One wrong move and we’d tip over, potentially blowing the truck, and ourselves, up.

Oliver and I were absolutely covered in blood root. I glanced at him, seeing nothing but his multicolored eyes as he peered through the windshield. I’d left my warriors and Gideon behind, so it was just me and the fire-obsessed cousin of my mate.

We were nearly at the outcropping of dead trees and the dilapidated temple where both Lena and I had been held captive and tortured. I could see the portal now, wide and rippling with energy. It reflected all of the colors of the incredible sunset behind it, but upside down, which was the only way to differentiate it from the landscape beyond.

“This is going to work,” Oliver remarked, more to himself than to me.

“You just want to play with fire again,” I mused, and Oliver smirked, shrugging one shoulder.

“My uncle Keaton had me light all of his cigars as a kid. He thought it was the most useful trick, but my parents thought differently. I caught the palace on fire more than once.”

I arched my brow at him, and he turned to me with a wry grin.

“Mischievous is a family trait. No one can fault me for that.”

“A family of menaces,” I breathed, shaking my head.

I wondered what my daughter would be like, who she would be like—Lena, with her striking intelligence and beauty, but a flair for the dramatics and an affinity for acting without thinking, or me, damn near perfect in every way?

I chuckled to myself as I pulled the truck into the clearing near the temple. Oliver sighed deeply, looking around.

“We have about twenty minutes to do what we need to do,” I said in a whisper, a feeling of unease rippling up my spine. Oliver was out of the truck before I’d even finished the sentence.

I stepped out of the truck as Oliver connected a hose to the fuel tank and began dragging it over to the portal. I hissed at him to be careful, noticing how his copper curls seemed to drift toward the portal the closer he got to the opening, like he was being pulled inside. Oliver waved his hand at me in dismissal as he began to spray fuel in front of the portal, and within minutes he’d soaked the area.

The smell of gasoline was sharp and made me slightly dizzy as I watched the fuel gauge drain.

“A little more,” I shouted, and Oliver continued to spray until the ground was so saturated with fuel that Oliver’s shoes made sloshing sounds as he walked through the grass and blood root back to the truck.

“Let’s get the tank out,” he said, removing the hose from the tank and tossing it nonchalantly toward the portal. It took us several minutes to push the tank out of the bed of the truck, letting it fall and rest where it landed.

“We gotta get the hell out of here,” I said, motioning towards the sky. It was turning a rich violet, the first stars peaking through the ribbon like gray clouds as the sunset faded over the horizon.

Oliver walked past me and started yanking on one of the dead trees, pulling off several dried out branches before we got back in the truck and drove onto a nearby ridge. I looked down at the portal, my hands gripping the steering wheel as Oliver stepped out of the truck.

“Drive it down there a bit so they can’t see it sitting on the ridge,” he commanded, dropping his bundle of branches on the ground.

I did just that and had just shut the driver's side door of the truck when Oliver used his powers to ignite the first branch like a torch.

I ran up to him, taking the first branch from him as he lit another, then another, until we were both holding two.

We waited. The flames were catching on the branches, turning that initial dull glow into raging embers that made the branches burn like torches. Dusk faded into night, and through the portal, I saw the first ripple of movement.

A group of vampires, Death Walkers, as Gideon had called them, stepped through the vortex and looked around. Their expressionless faces could have been harboring shock based on the rigidity of their bodies. One of them was dressed in red robes made of fine fabric, and I slowly nudged Xander with my elbow. That Death Walker must be a commander of some kind.

Another group came through the portal, then another, until at least a hundred vampires were gathered in the clearing.

Oliver opened his mouth wide and let out a howl so shrill it made the hair on my arms stand on end. The vampires snapped their heads at us, their teeth shining in the moonlight as hissing and screeching filled the clearing. Oliver threw the first torch, and within a heartbeat the clearing erupted into flames.

Chaos ensued as the fire licked up the robes of the Death Walkers, the lot of them thrown into a panic. Another wave of them stepped out of the portal into the flames and were immediately engulfed in wave after wave of fire as Oliver and I began throwing the rest of the torches.

The entire valley was on fire now. The dry grass and blood root soaked in fuel set a black cloud of toxic smoke into the air, making it almost impossible to see what was happening below. But I knew more vampires were coming through the portal right into the fiery fray, and before they even had a chance to react, they were lost to the choking swell of the smoke, and then surrounded by flames.

An explosion rocked the valley and echoed through the surrounding landscape. Debris shot high in the air as the fuel tank we'd left in the clearing exploded, sending a shower of metal and heat down on the vampires. None of them had been able to escape the chaos, at least not yet.

My ears were ringing from all the noise. I looked at Oliver, who was panting, his eyes reflecting in the flames as he looked down at what we'd done.

Another wave of vampires came through the portal and tried to turn around, but were met by the next group of their comrades trying to come through as well. Some of them began climbing up the hill toward us. Covered in blood root, we were damn near camouflaged against the night sky behind us. We charged them as they got near, throwing them back into the flames. Their screeches of surprise had alerted a fresh group of them coming through the portal, and at least a dozen vampires were now heading in our direction.

"Get back to that truck!" I cried, stumbling as I grabbed Oliver by the shoulder and turned him away from the valley.

But then I heard them—the hybrid beasts. Their roars cut through the screeching below and ripped the sky in two.

I had enough time to look down at the clearing once more before we bolted. I saw it there, flames dancing across its outstretched wing—the hybrid who had taken Lena, then me... the hybrid we hadn't been able to kill.

"RUN!" I screamed at Oliver, damn near dragging him down the other side of the hill we'd been standing atop.

Oliver was panting, trying to find his breath in the thick, smoky air as we ran toward the truck.

I jumped in through the passenger side door and crawled to the driver's seat, fumbling with the ignition before the truck struggled to start with a cracking rumble of protest. Smoke was choking the engine. I pounded on the dash as I revved, begging it to start.

Oliver crawled in next to me and shut the door just as the winged hybrid landed mere feet away from us.

The engine started, thank the Goddess, as the hybrid situated itself right in front of the truck.

"Hit it!" Oliver cried, and I slammed my foot on the gas. The truck flew forward and slammed into the hybrid, sending it flying back. I threw the truck in reverse and sped backward, then drove the truck in a circle so we were facing Crimson Creek once again. In the rearview mirror, I saw nothing but flames as the fire crept up the valley, the fire spreading rapidly through the dry grass. Flames were lashing at the portal now, fueled by the dead and dying below.

We f*****g did it. We f*****g did—

The truck lifted off the ground by several feet and slammed back to the earth. Oliver yelped in surprise, rolling down his window and sticking his head out, looking up.

"What the f**k are you doing?" I screamed, but my voice was drowned out by his panicked protest as we sped forward.

I was pinning the gas pedal to the floor with all my weight, the truck flying over the hills and landing so violently that pieces from the undercarriage were coming loose and flying out behind us.

Talons cut through the roof of the truck, mere inches from slicing through my scalp.

Again we were lifted into the air, this time much higher. Oliver unsheathed a knife from his pocket and climbed out of the window, his legs hooked on the underside of the seat.

I turned the steering wheel back and forth, trying to swing us. Oliver was screaming in frustration as he swung his blade at the hybrid's feet. I heard a screech, and then the truck was sideways, Oliver hanging out the window.

I grabbed one of his ankles as he began to slide out.

f**k. This was really, really bad.

I grabbed his other ankle and pulled him back inside, his face reddened and eyes bulging from the blood rushing to his head.

"I cut off one leg," he smirked, and I noticed his blood-drenched sleeves.

The hybrid was flying in a circle, trying to free its talons from the roof. Oliver sliced at the talons, which only caused the beast to fly upward in its haste to get away.

“Stop!” I cried, my head spinning as the truck swung in a circle. We were twenty feet off the ground now, and my stomach was tied in knots as I caught a glimpse of the ground below.

But then we were falling, fast. I grabbed onto Oliver as the truck slammed violently onto the ground on its side.

I opened my eyes, blinking against the shower of glass from the windshield. I was on top of Oliver, who was groaning, his face covered in blood root, and now fresh blood.

I couldn't move.

Something sharp was caught in my lower back. I tried to raise my head but a surge of hot agony ripped over my body. I couldn't even scream.

Slowly, whatever was protruding from my back released itself, and I fell forward onto Oliver, who grunted painfully.

I was choked on blood, unable to form the words to ask Oliver if he was okay. I felt a shadow move over the truck, blocking the moonlight pouring through the shattered windshield. Two fiery red eyes came into view, and a gnarled, talon-tipped hand reached through the windshield and grabbed me by the throat.

Oliver screamed, but it was too late.

It was over.

Lena, I said through the bond. Tell her I love her. Tell her I love you both.

Then it went black.

CHAPTER 617 : WOLF OF THE MOON GODDESS

Lena

Mara had her legs crossed, her foot tapping with silent rhythm and she flipped through the spellbook. I was watching her with marked suspicion, my arms crossed over my chest, not even hiding the glare fixed on my face.

Clare was pacing back and forth behind the couch Mara was sitting on, and occasionally Clare looked over her shoulder, peering down at whatever page Mara was studying. Maeve was talking in a hushed voice to Grandma and my mom, who were standing in the corner of the cozy sitting room near the dining hall in the Castle Drogomor.

Night was falling. We'd arrived around midday, and I'd spent the rest of the day listening to the news beginning to trickle in from the west.

It was all bad news—terrible news. Grandma and Maeve had immediately gone to the hospital in Mirage to donate blood for the influx of wounded and dying shoulders we were being carted across the sea towards Valoria for care. The Valorian army, those reserves who had stayed behind, were already

setting up a perimeter around the southern tip of the territory to protect the great, bustling cities within.

I donated only a few vials of blood in the infirmary at the castle. I was pregnant, after all. The act made me dizzy and lightheaded for the rest of the afternoon.

But then Grandma and Maeve came home with Mara in tow, and now it was time to figure out what the hell we were supposed to do with this stupid book.

My mom, Clare, and Mara had their powers of sight. My powers of sight only came to me in dreams, which wasn't entirely helpful since I had little to no control over what I saw, and when. Apparently, we were supposed to use our combined powers to do... something.

"This is all in Prithen," Mara mused to herself, flipping another page and dragging her finger down the text.

"Prithen? What the hell is Prithen?" Clare leaned over the back of the couch to look at the page Mara had stopped on.

"An ancient language, something from before the time of Morrighan and Lycaon from what we know. The Church of the Moon Goddess has a few scripts but that's it, never a full... a full example of the alphabet those early people used. This is... priceless."

"It doesn't belong to the Church," Maeve said firmly as she rounded the couch and came to sit beside me.

Mara gave her a side-eyed look as she flipped another page.

"Can you translate it?" Mom asked from the corner of the room.

Mara let out her breath and nodded, then shrugged. "Some. I think I knew enough to get the gist of what this book is about. It's a fairytale."

"It's not a fairytale," Maeve retorted. "It's a book of spells."

"It's a book about spells; that's the difference. This comes from Leto's people before she was a Goddess. This book in particular is about a girl who is given the powers of a wolf so that she can effectively hunt during an especially brutal winter. There's a spell for it—"

"They what?" Maeve interrupted, looking skeptical.

"I think that's what happened, anyway. I already said there's only a few scripts left from this language."

"That's all this book is about... fairy tales?" I asked, my heart falling into my stomach. How was this helpful? Why were we wasting any more time on this?

"So this is the origin on how, and why, we have the powers of wolves," Mom said absently, walking past the windows on the far side of the room.

"Sacred powers of the hunt, in particular, for food, and for protection against enemies," Mara added, pointing to a sketch on one of the pages.

Maeve jumped to her feet and snatched the book from Mara, staring down at it in shock.

“Oh, my Goddess,” she murmured. She turned to face Mom and Grandma, her finger pointing to the sketch. “When I shifted in that clearing with this book, when I saw the spirits, they showed me my entire life. Everything. But they... they lingered on this moment,” she jabbed at the sketch, her eyes pleading with ours for understanding as she looked around the room. “When I went into that circle of stones in Dianny, I thought it was you and me, Mom. I thought I was standing over you, both of us in our wolf forms. White wolves—Una and the rest of the women of Dianny interpreted that as you were dying, and I was ascending to the throne. But they were wrong!” She turned to me, her eyes widening. “I know what I’m supposed to do now. I know how we stop this war and save our men.”

“W-what?” I choked. I didn’t like the look in her eyes. She looked almost feral.

“You have a plan, don’t you? You were trying to do something to stop this war, to stop the vampires. I could see it in your eyes when you chased me outside last night,” Maeve said to me.

“She’s going to close the portal and prevent them from ever accessing our realm again,” Mom cut in before I could say anything, nodding her head toward Maeve. “I saw it. I had a dream about it.”

“Mom?” I said, turning to her, but her eyes were on Maeve.

“But she can’t do so until she comes into her wolf powers,” Maeve said, turning to look at me again.

“What is going on?” I asked sharply. “What are you talking about?”

“We’re going to activate your powers early, using this book,” Maeve said as she held it up to show me the picture of the two wolves. “Then, we’re going to war.”

“I’m fine,” I said sharply as Mom, Grandma, and Maeve argued about whether or not this was a good idea. People shifted all the time while they were pregnant. It wasn’t uncommon by any means.

Having a spell cast that would activate wolf powers, regardless of my young age, was something else entirely.

I honestly didn’t have time to care. I was itching to get going, to get to Breles like we’d planned. I would be going with Maeve and Mara while everyone else stayed behind. We had a seaplane waiting for us at the port of Valoria whenever we were ready.

I was more than ready. I’d had a sinking feeling in my gut all day long, and that tethered thread binding me to Xander? It had been tugging on me all day, pulling me east, to wherever he was.

We were all standing in the chilly back garden and night was falling, casting a pale purple glow over the castle behind us. I shivered, then crossed my arms defensively over my chest.

“We don’t have any time,” I continued, pointing to the book. “Do it, now!”

Maeve sucked in her breath, glancing at Clare and Mara before turning her gaze back on Mom and Grandma. Everyone needed to help say the spell. All of them would need to tap into their powers, no

matter how small and insignificant, and essentially pull my wolf powers out of me and put them back in, if what Mara said was true.

It sounded painful, but again, I was beyond caring.

"I'm fine," I repeated, catching my mom's gaze. "And I'll be fine."

"Okay," she replied in a small voice, her eyes glistening with uncertainty. "Alright."

"Alright then," Maeve said as she clapped her hands and cleared her throat, turning to Mara to fetch the book. Mara murmured something, pointing to a page. "So, I have to be the one to read it?"

"Yes, it has to be you. At least, I'm pretty sure."

I didn't ask why, but I did wonder.

Everyone formed a semicircle around me. Clare reached out to Mara, then my mom, her hands outstretched.

"I think it's customary to hold hands when doing group witchcraft," she teased.

Maeve snorted with mirth as everyone held hands, but she stepped forward, a mere foot from where I stood. She placed her hand on my shoulder.

"Ready?" she whispered, squeezing my shoulder.

"Yes," I breathed. She held my gaze for a moment, then let out her breath, leaning to whisper in my ear.

"I love you, Lena."

"I love you, too."

She didn't put any distance between us before reading in the spell, having practiced the pronunciation of the strange, guttural language of a time long past. Behind us, the rest of the women repeated the words to the best of their ability, stumbling over some syllables.

If this didn't work, I didn't care. I was still going to try everything I could to close that portal and save my people, my family, and my mate. I could try. I would try.

Nothing happened for a long time, but then I felt a tinge of pain in my shoulder where Maeve was gripping me, like a burn. She pulled away, feeling it too.

"Lena," she breathed, her eyes wide as I staggered backward, doubling over at the waist. I could hear Mom's footsteps as she rushed toward me, but then she stopped, her voice lifted in protest as she was... held back—held back by my grandma.

Their faces were the last I saw before I fell onto my knees.

Maeve came up behind me as I laid down on my side, my cheek pressed against the cool cobblestone walkway. The sky seemed to spin overhead as she laid her hands over me, her voice a soft whisper in my ear.

I closed my eyes, just blinking. But when I opened them again I was no longer in the back garden, I was... I was in the spirit realm, a place of nothing but vast water below and an endless sky above me. Stars twinkled in the dark night as I floated on my back, suspended against my will.

"You were supposed to keep this, silly girl," came a kind feminine voice nearby.

I felt something press into the palm of my hand and turned my head to look at my open palm. A sunstone glimmered in the starlight as I wrapped my fingers around it.

"My friends needed it," I breathed, my voice a faint whisper.

"You are fundamentally good, Selene. And when you're ready, you'll know what to do with the stone. It's yours forever, to use at your will. And when you're ready to come home to us, Goddess, we will be waiting to escort you to your kingdom in the stars."

I didn't understand, but it didn't matter. I felt myself being swallowed up by the water, my breath catching in my throat as I fell back into my own realm.

"Is she alright?" Mom's voice said, somewhere far away.

"Lena," Maeve's voice sounded in my ears, and I opened my eyes. "Let's go, we have a war to win."

"Can I shift now?" I breathed.

Maeve just smiled and extended her hand to help me up.

CHAPTER 618 : LET'S FIND OUR ALPHA

Lena

Being a wolf was not what I had expected. And for someone who was the freaking Moon Goddess reincarnate, I was really struggling to get the hang of it.

The island of Cantorina was situated in the Isles of Denali, and it was the closest we could get to Breles by plane at the moment. We were waiting for a boat to pick us up and take us the rest of the way, but it was absolutely dumping rain while we waited, and there was no way in hell even the stealthiest cruiser was going to make it into the shallow cove we were sheltering in with this weather.

Waves pounded the shore, stirring the powder-fine sand. I pulled my shawl a little tighter around my shoulders as I huffed a breath and watched the white cap waves beat the living hell out of the cove.

We'd been stuck here for twelve hours. I was starting to rethink my agreement to stay with Maeve and find help with what I needed to do. I was wasting precious time.

Night was falling again, but there would be no sunset tonight.

I'd spent the last several hours in my wolf form, canvassing the island and getting used to being on all fours. I could admit that I was a beautiful wolf, a silvery white with a long, glossy coat and lots of fluff. I stared at my reflection in a shallow pool I'd found for a long time, marveling at the transformation.

My striking good looks were all that I had going for me at the moment, however. I was clumsy and slow, barely able to run faster than a jog without tripping over a rock or even my own feet. Maeve assured me

it would take time to get used to it, but she'd also told me about her first experience shifting, and she had apparently taken off like a rocket.

I came back, in my human form and dressed, to the stately home we were sheltering in which was built into the cliffside overlooking the water. The family that lived there were apparently good friends of Maeve's, and we'd been fed and offered beds and whatever else we needed.

They even offered to have their twin daughters, who were only a few years older than me, go out on a run with me, but I'd refused. I needed to figure this out for myself, come hell or high water.

And right now, it was high water. And hell was just forty miles west.

Maeve was sitting on the upper deck, which by the grace of the Goddess was covered and screened from the rain. She was drinking scotch, and not slowly, her eyes rimmed with red.

"Any news?" I asked.

She swallowed a mouthful of her drink and nodded, clearing her throat as the liquid no doubt burned on the way down. "I spoke to Troy," she said with a sigh of relief. "A boat will be here within the hour, but that means we'll reach Breles after dark and... it's unlikely they'll let us come ashore, not until morning."

"I thought they were able to take back part of the city?"

"They were, and the attacks are... there are fewer and fewer vampires coming to the edge of Breles every night, from what he said." She paused, setting her glass of scotch down again, and then thought better of it, drinking the rest in one swallow.

"What's the matter, Aunt Maeve?"

"Oliver and Xander saved... I don't even know how to describe what they've done, what they were able to do. But somehow they made it to Crimson Creek and killed an entire legion of the vampire army using fire and gasoline, preventing them from attacking Breles again. Our armies had an entire night of peace, of much needed rest." Her voice wavered. This should have been good news, great news. But something hung heavy in her voice that sent a chill up my spine.

"What happened to Xander?" I asked, but I already knew. Her eyes met mine, a glimmer of moisture lining her lower lashes.

"He's gone. Oliver believes he was taken through the portal."

I chewed the inside of my cheeks as I sat down at the patio table across from her, folding my hands in my lap.

"He knows what he's doing," I said shakily, but Maeve sucked in her breath, blowing it back out again.

I could do nothing but stare out at the turbulent water as Maeve described what Oliver and Xander had accomplished, and the tragedy that followed. Oliver had woken up in Breles, panic stricken and frantic. He'd almost died. He should have been dead. Xander's warriors who had gone to Crimson Creek with them had found Oliver practically crushed inside a truck the next morning, unconscious, and Xander was nowhere to be found.

Oliver told his father everything, and now an allied force was guarding the portal day in and day out, killing any and all vampires who crossed through when night fell. It was working, and could have signaled the end of the conflict if the vampires hadn't been crossing through the realms using the bloodstone, creating small fissures that closed up within minutes.

"Oliver told Troy that the last thing he remembers was feeling like a blanket was wrapping around him, shielding him from whatever took Xander," Maeve concluded.

I didn't wipe the tears away. My heart was beating slow, too broken to react. I felt numb, weightless, like I was simply existing and incapable of feeling.

If Oliver had been that hurt, so hurt that even his powers of healing couldn't heal himself, Xander would have been just as hurt if not more so.

Would I have felt it if he died in another realm?

I reached up to absently touch the mark above my breast, and I felt nothing.

"I need to go to Crimson Creek," I said without looking at her.

"I know."

"You can't stop me from going—"

"I won't," Maeve replied, her voice firm and steady. "I wouldn't stop you. No one will stop you."

"What about my dad?" I asked, glancing at her.

Maeve's lips pursed, her gaze fixed on her empty glass. "He won't know. Not until you're already on your way."

I nodded, blinking back a fresh wave of tears as I looked out over the water once more. Fog was heavy on the water now. Whatever boat they were sending, well, all I could do was pray that they had a stellar navigation system on board.

Nothing was going to prevent me from finishing this, from saving my mate.

Or avenging his death.

Oliver drank deeply from a metal canteen, his eyes lined with purple and green bruises that looked almost unreal. I'd never seen anyone look so beaten before, not in my life. His major wounds had healed but left severe bruising all over his body. He was shirtless, sitting up on a cot in a windblown canvas tent just outside the port of Breles, his eyes shadowed by pain and fatigue.

"You need rest—"

"I'm going with you," he retorted, effectively ending whatever argument I'd been planning to start. I had been in Breles for less than an hour. I'd been escorted to Uncle Troy's tent and given new clothes, thick and warm thermals and armor made of steel and leather. Maeve quickly braided my hair and wound the

braid into a bun at the nape of my neck, fixing a black beanie over my striking white hair. A belt heavy with knives like the ones we'd been given in Brune hung from my waist.

I'd left the tent the second I was dressed and suited up for whatever battle I'd face on my journey to Crimson Creek.

My heart squeezed painfully when Troy asked if I'd at least see my dad before I left. I couldn't. I couldn't for more reasons than the fact he would fight me tooth and nail when he found out what I meant to do. I hadn't seen him in months in reality, even if it felt like only a few weeks had passed to me.

But he'd been at war. He'd seen things I couldn't fathom. I was afraid that when I looked into his eyes I would see nothing but a void of death and exhaustion, any shred of the kind, loving man he'd been before the war—a war I could have finished before it started—erased.

It was my fault he was here.

Oliver waved his hand in front of my face, and I reared back, clearing my throat as the motion broke me from my heartbreaking internal reflection.

"I'm leaving now," I said, standing up as he started reaching for his clothes.

"Give me five minutes. I can get us a truck, or something."

"Xander's warriors are going to escort us. They already have something lined up."

"Ah, Johnny and Colton? Meatheads, those two. More brawn than brains—"

"Will you just get dressed?" I snapped, then mumbled an apology.

Oliver didn't snap back at me like he normally would have. He was just as resigned as I was as he got dressed and pulled on his armor and gear. I stole a glance at his battered legs and winced as I looked away. I could see where his legs had been crushed and broken at one point. Injuries like that would have killed the average shifter instantly.

Oliver wasn't average, not a bit.

"You're really going in?"

"Yes," I said without hesitation.

"Cool. I was hoping you'd say that," he said, and I looked up at him, our eyes locking on each other.

"You're not going to do this alone, Lena. I promise. Xander was—is... he is my friend."

"Thank you," I whispered, the words all I could muster as I swallowed back the fractured emotion threatening to take over my calculated, calm reserve.

Remain emotionless, void, resigned. Hide your fear, your anguish, your worry.

Bottle it all up, and put a bow on it, and give it all to the king when you shred him into pieces with your powers.

I let out my breath as Oliver finished dressing, and we turned to leave his tent. It was pitch black, nothing but the muted lantern light of passing warriors to guide us to where I was supposed to meet

John and Colton.

We reached the very edge of the war camp where the front lines were stationed, but idle. Beyond were the ruins of Breles, nothing but rubble and shadow against the starry horizon.

"I thought I'd be seeing you again," came a familiar voice through the darkness, and I turned to find Gideon leaning against a truck, his arms crossed over my chest.

I wasn't a hugger, but that was exactly what I did. I ran to him and threw my arms around his chest and nearly lost control of the tears that were threatening to spill down my cheeks.

Two men I didn't recognize were standing with Gideon. I assumed they were John and Colton, Xander's warriors. They bowed their heads to me, and I felt a shock roll over my skin at the gesture.

"Luna," John said, meeting my eye as he straightened up.

Luna. I was, at least... I would be. I would be the Luna of Egoren.

"Let's go find our Alpha," I said firmly, and so we did.

Chapter 619 : His Death is Mine

Lena

Oliver was driving, and I was gripping my seatbelt for dear life as he topped one hundred miles per hour in the rickety truck that definitely was not made for this kind of speed. The barren landscape sped past in a blur, and my stomach clenched as I forced my eyes to stay open and on the road.

Normally I would have asked him what the hell he was doing driving so fast, but I didn't care. We'd make it to Crimson Creek within the hour at this rate.

Oliver had nearly killed me, Charlie, and Uncle Troy driving like this once. It had been his first time behind the wheel. Troy was teaching Charlie and Oliver how to drive, and we'd taken the newly constructed bridges that interlocked some of the large islands in the isles. They weren't open to the public yet, which was a good thing, because Oliver had launched Troy's unassuming box of a car into hyperspeed before Troy had a chance to protest.

We had all screamed, but Oliver was screaming out of pure glee. He'd always been an adrenaline seeker.

For this drive, however, he was nothing but focused. The silence in the truck was overwhelming, and I was left to the mercy of my own thoughts. We'd left Breles two hours ago and hadn't stopped. Beyond the blur of the rolling hills, I caught glimpses of the burned villages and cities along the highway, and that was it. No one else was on the road. No one was walking around the villages. It was empty, not a soul left to pick up the pieces.

"How are the northern packs faring?" I asked through gritted teeth as Oliver sped up to one hundred ten miles per hour, his face expressionless.

"They're holding onto their territories but have experienced major casualties across the north. Dad talked to Kacidra recently, and Red Lakes is the largest outpost for refugees coming from the smaller mountain villages in the north, like Cedar Hollow. The vampires are using smaller portals to come

through, and it's been impossible to figure out where those portals are before they close up behind them."

I swallowed back whatever reply had been forming on my tongue. We'd lost the southern end of the continent, but the north had a chance. At least, they would have a chance, if we were successful.

Success seemed like a pipedream. I had no real plan of action besides walking into the portal and shredding the realm. Oliver was planning on finding Zeke at the very least, maybe even teaming up with the lower vampires to start a war in their realm against King Nikolas so that the brunt of his forces were situated in their own realm, instead of ours.

Oliver was fully aware that it was likely we would have to separate to accomplish our own goals.

I didn't realize I'd been closing my eyes and nodding off to sleep until I felt the truck beginning to slow. Oliver murmured something under his breath as I opened my eyes. I started, my body going rigid as I looked out over the outskirts of Crimson Creek.

Large tents had been erected all over the small town—black tents, so unlike the flimsy canvas tents I'd seen in Breles. I looked over at Oliver for a moment, then behind me where John and Colton were now huddled shoulder to shoulder and looked past us from the back seat.

Lower vampires were walking around in droves. The sun was coming up, and they were hurrying into tents, their arms full of food and supplies.

Food and supplies... rations—rations with the royal seal of the united allied forces on them.

"Oh my Goddess," I managed to croak, my voice cracking as we drove by at a crawl.

"They look like us," Colton said quietly.

"They're more like us than we give them credit for," Oliver replied in a level tone, his eyes following a group of young women carrying small children to a tent, all of their faces reddened with tears.

"They came through the portal," I breathed in disbelief. If they'd come here, the very land their own realm was battling against, the situation in the Night Realm must be dire.

We passed down the narrow street of what was considered downtown Crimson Creek, past the bar and hotel where I'd stayed with Xander. It felt like a lifetime ago now. All of those memories of our field study came flooding back to me as the massive estate houses rose up in the distance, a pale, cloudy sunrise lighting them up like beacons.

Oliver didn't stop the truck until we'd reached the clearing that I knew so well. The portal rose up ahead of us, the sunrise reflecting upside down and glistening with energy. Warriors surrounded the truck, but then walked away as Oliver made our presence known. We were expected here, it seemed.

I got out of the truck and stalked over to a commander, who was wearing a blue and turquoise pin on his jacket—a Poldesse commander.

He turned around, eyeing me skeptically as I approached but bowed to me nonetheless.

"I'm closing the portal," I said without breaking my stride.

“How are these things supposed to get back into their lands if you close it?” he asked, and I didn’t like the patronizing tone of his voice.

I narrowed my eyes at him, tilting my chin to meet his eyes. “There won’t be much to return to. They will stay here.”

“Princess—”

“That’s an order,” I snapped, then turned to face Oliver, John, and Colton, who had come up behind me. “We have twelve hours in the Night Realm to do what needs to be done. Let any lower vampire seeking refuge cross the portal. Keep guards at the entrance on both sides. Everyone gets through, especially the women and children.” I fixed my gaze on Oliver as I took a shuddering breath. “I’ll take you to Brune. It’s not far from the portal’s entrance.”

“Brune?” the commander cut in, stepping forward.

I turned to him as he tilted his head, looking skeptical. “Yes,” I said sharply. “King Costas once offered us aide—”

“That’s where these people are coming from. They said their king was selling them as slaves to the Vampire King—”

“We need to go, now,” Oliver cut in, fixing the commander with a steel-eyed look. I looked behind us, where a crowd of warriors was gathering, all of them wearing the patches of their homelands on their jackets and hats as they readied their weapons—Drogomor, Winter Forest, Mirage, Poldesse, Breles... even Egoren. These warriors were from all over the realm and beyond, and despite how battered and exhausted they were, they were willing to fight, together.

We were going in. I would be the one to lead them.

The commander stepped out of my way as I walked forward toward the portal. I could feel its pull, and behind me Oliver said, “I can find Brune. You don’t need to come—”

“There’s someone I need to see,” I said in reply, reaching up to touch the sunstone that was tucked inside a locket around my neck.

It wasn’t hard to get into Brune. It was empty, for one. The crystals that once lit the cavern up like day were darkened and cracked. Some of them had fallen from the ceiling of the impossibly large cavern and fallen to the ground below, crushing houses and shops into splinters.

We hadn’t stopped to rest at all since crossing through the portal. It was daytime in this realm, but I knew it would be fleeting. Once night fell, I’d be hightailing it to King Nikolas’s castle, to Xander.

The fifty or so warriors jogging behind Oliver and me, under our command, as well as John and Colton, were looking around in awe. If only they could have seen this kingdom in all its splendor. It was devastating, honestly, but I didn’t have time to dwell.

I led them through the village and into the forest, all the way up to the bridge that connected Narcissa’s lair to the kingdom of Brune.

But there was no longer a bridge to the other side.

I came to a stop before the drop-off. We were blanketed in darkness save for the pale light of the lanterns some of the warriors were carrying.

“Narcissa!” I cried into the darkness.

There was no response. I felt a chill run up my spine as I turned to Oliver, my shoulders slumping in defeat.

I needed her. I needed her to explain how I was supposed to use the sunstone.

But I turned my head around toward the sound of footsteps on the ledge across the dropoff—hurried steps, like someone running.

“Lena? Is that you?”

“Kiern!” I breathed, grabbing the lantern John was holding and lifting it over my head to illuminate my face.

A thundering crack sounded in the cavern as another chunk of the crystal-lined ceiling broke away in the distance, the impact with the city below sending a shockwave over us all. Some of the warriors yelled in surprise, a concerned murmur cutting through the group.

“Where is Narcissa?” I cried, panic rising in my throat. “Kiern?”

“I’m here,” she whimpered, and I could hear her panting with exertion. “The bridge—”

“How can I get across?”

“Just walk,” came Narcissa’s lifted, friendly voice in the darkness.

I licked dry lips, turning to Oliver, who was shaking his head. His face was pale, and I could see the gooseflesh covering the exposed skin of his arms.

“Walk across what?” I retorted, turning back to the darkness.

“I won’t let you fall,” Narcissa said lightly.

“Narcissa, I need you to come with me. All of you. Kiern, Starla if she’s still here—”

“To kill my brother—”

“And to reunite you with Andromeda,” I interjected, Andromeda’s name leaving my lips sending a hush over the area.

“Andromeda?” Narcissa whispered, and for the first time, I heard a hint of pure sadness in her usually kind and level voice.

“Please,” I cried, letting my stone wall of reserve shatter. I didn’t care if the warriors I was commanding saw me cry now. I was desperate. “The king has my mate.”

“I cannot help you—”

"I met your father. He gave me the book... the book that once belonged to Morrighan."

It was quiet again, but I could feel a creeping energy blanketing us.

"Where did you see my father?" Narcissa bit out, her voice booming through the entirety of Brune. She sounded like the Goddess she was, and not just some friendly vampire who enjoyed baking cookies.

"The castle," I whispered beneath my breath.

I knew she could hear me. I knew that she understood the significance of his location, as well. "He lives in the library, unbeknownst to your brother."

"He guards my fallen siblings," she said over me, and through the darkness I saw a glimmer of movement. Kiern was speaking quickly, her words rushed and barely audible.

"Narcissa," I said as I fell to my knees. "Please, I beg you. I need you. Goddess, you must protect your people."

I felt someone touch me, running their thumb across my forehead. I looked up into Narcissa's eyes, which were glowing with fury.

"I get to kill him," she whispered. "His death is mine."

"Yes," I said in a whimper, overwhelmed by her power, her stance. "I promise."

"Well, let's go," she said in a shockingly chipper and casual voice, walking past me and through the warriors, who had parted to allow her to pass.

Everyone was pale and wide-eyed as the beautiful but terrifying woman walked away, turning her head to motion us to follow.

Kiern knelt beside me, squeezing my hand.

Chapter 620 : Xander Is Dead

Xander

I wanted to be dead.

But those vampire bastards were doing everything they could to keep me alive. I was sure the torture they were inflicting was part of the act of trying to turn me into one of their hybrids, but the powers in my blood were preventing that from happening.

I was reserving those powers, turning them into something almost euphoric instead of deadly. If one of the Death Walkers attempted to feed on me, well, they were suddenly dizzy and unstable, often falling into a deep slumber with a childlike smile on their face.

I don't know how long this had been going on. I hadn't left the circular room where they were keeping me. The only thing keeping me lucid was Lena's smell, which seemed to overwhelm the room. This is where she had been kept, and I was sure King Nikolas was keeping me here on purpose.

My body was in shambles, and every ragged breath was a challenge. I couldn't feel my legs, and my skin burned with fever.

Just let me die, I thought, every time a new vampire came in to force some blood root tonic down my throat. Just let me die.

But then I... I was sure I wasn't seeing what I saw.

Slate was in the room, talking to a Death Walker. His skin was... gray, his eyes a pale red. He looked totally different, but yet, his voice—his voice was the same.

Not real—he wasn't real. I was dreaming.

Until I wasn't.

"I'm going to be the one to kill you," Slate said into my ear, his elongated fangs grazing my neck. I tried to push him away, but I couldn't move my arms. My fingers twitched in response to his touch. I curled my fingers, which sent a shooting pain up my arms and into my shoulders.

No, not Slate—I'd seen him go over that gorge. I'd heard him hit the bottom.

"Get away from him, Slate. You'll have your turn," King Nikolas said as he strode into the room.

I was able to turn my head enough to see him as he approached, and I started, shocked by his skin.

He was pale, nearly translucent. But burn scars fanned out over his skin, covering one eye. He looked... horrific, a walking nightmare. And he was furious.

"Can you feel her yet, little wolf?" he sneered, reaching down to scrape a long, jagged fingernail down my bare chest.

I hissed with pain as he broke my skin open. He chuckled under his breath, eyes flicking toward Slate, who was staring at the fresh blood on my chest with a look of pure, animalist hunger. "Wait your turn," he barked at Slate.

"The guards say his blood is... different," Slate drooled, which made my jaw clench.

I felt my powers of darkness rushing forward, twisting and turning into something deadly in my veins.

"New vampires are always so hungry," the king said to me with a shrug, mopping up my bloodied chest with the corner of his cloak. "Slate nearly wiped out all of our servants before I could stop him."

"Get away from me," I growled, but neither man moved away from the bed.

"Mate... such a strange concept. What does it feel like, having someone bound to you like that? They say it's like sharing a soul. Is that true?"

"Mates are nothing but property," Slate sneered, "breeding stock."

"I'll f*****g kill you, again," I hissed, my fingers twitching as fury and adrenaline numbed the pain I was experiencing.

"Speaking of breeding," the king said as he began to walk around to the other side of the bed, his long platinum hair trailing out behind him in a sheet of silver white. "Did your mate really think she could hide her pregnancy from me? I could taste it in her blood, you know. I could taste you. The only reason I kept her alive during her time here is because the blood of a wolf pup is especially... delicious—"

“You f*****g monster,” I ground out, trying to form fists with my shattered hands.

“I’ll get an heir out of her yet,” the king said, unperturbed by my curses. “Then you can have her, Slate. That was the deal, after all.”

“And a kingdom in New Night,” Slate added, rocking on his heels.

New Night?

“Ah, yes. Of course.” The king reached up to tuck a lock of my hair behind my ear, his touch making my skin crawl. “How close we are to taking over your realm, little wolf. Your homes will soon be filled with my kind. Your people won’t need them. Your kind... will just be fodder to my armies. And they are hungry.”

“Can I drink from him now?” Slate whined, trembling as he rested his palms on the bed, down right shaking with anticipation.

“You will not drink before your king,” the king said sharply, and Slate cowered, falling to his knees on the ground.

I swallowed back a grunt of mirth seeing Slate cower. I let my remaining energy feed my power, my soul-sucking power, the power that had plagued my family since the dawn of time.

But then I felt a searing pain in the mark on my chest. I gasped, sucking in my breath as the heat of it spread over my skin. The king hadn’t noticed; he was too busy chastising Slate to pay me any mind.

Lena—she was here, in this realm. I could feel it. She was... she was close. Oh Goddess, no. No! She was walking right into a trap.

“You can’t kill me,” I taunted as I let the full strength of my power roll over my body. I couldn’t protect Lena by blanketing her in shadows, not now, not when I needed those powers to kill, or at least subdue the king.

But I was weak. It was taking all of the depleted strength I had to bring those powers forth.

This was going to kill me. I had no doubt in my mind that this was how I would die.

But I’d be taking the king with me into Hell.

“I won’t be killing you. You’ll make too fine of a hybrid to waste.”

I closed my eyes against his words, gritting my teeth as I felt his hand wrap around my wrist, then his breath was on my skin.

The bite didn’t hurt. I was used to it now. But the king was much stronger than his guards, and the force of his power was evident by how fast he was draining me.

But I was not just a shifter. I let my powers trickle away, rushing out of the wound he’d inflicted. I used the last ounce of life I had to push that shadow through me, and out of me, right into the king.

I was barely lucid when I heard the king's shocked moan. Something clattered to the ground as my other wrist met with Slate's teeth, who was too hungry to even notice the damage my blood had inflicted on his master.

Death was near, and it was cold and empty. I felt it take me like a wave of icy water as the dim light of the room began to fade into flakes of black nothingness.

"Lena," I said aloud, and I was sure it would be the last word to ever leave my lips.

Lena

The castle was heavily guarded, and it took the full force of the legion of warriors to cut through the vampires and gain entrance. Vampire after vampire charged for us, snarling and clacking their fangs together as they lunged for my troops.

Even I wielded blades, cutting them down, slicing them up and pushing them over the bridge that led to the castle, all while Narcissa walked in front of me, casually, like she was just taking a midnight stroll.

It wasn't until we reached the castle that I caught a glimpse of her abilities. The door to the castle flew open with a swipe of her hand, flying off into the deep well of rock that surrounded the fortress. She strode inside, looking around as more vampires rushed us. She was oblivious to the battle taking place behind her as she turned toward the staircase.

"All you need to do," she said softly, a playful smile touching her lips as she placed her hand on the railing, "is will the stone to do your bidding. You must offer it something, and when it accepts, you will be able to use it in any way you desire."

With that, she was gone, and I knew exactly where she was headed. She was going to the library, to find that ghost of her father.

I took off for the stairs and let Oliver, Kiern, and the warriors finish the job.

I screamed Xander's name over and over. I sent my silver wolves made of mist and starlight rushing down every corridor and shredding whatever vampires they found there.

But then I felt him, barely, but strong enough to give me a clue as to where he was—where he was barely hanging on.

He was in my old room, and the door was shut.

I kicked it over and over again until it opened, flying off the hinges. I gasped in shock as I stumbled over Slate, or what had once been Slate, who was now one of the gray vampire guards. He was dead, at least, as dead as he could be being undead and all.

I didn't even think before I drove a wooden blade straight through his heart, and his body turned to ash around me.

The king was slumped over whoever was laying sprawled out in the bed, his silver hair draped over the mattress. His eyes were open, but unseeing, his long fingernails clutching the sheets as he began to slide onto the floor.

He was paralyzed. He couldn't move. But his eyes flicked to mine as he fell onto the ground, furious and full of death.

"Narcissa!" I screeched.

She wanted to be the one to kill him, but I had a wooden blade in my hand. I could do it. I could do it now.

But then my gaze fluttered to the body on the bed, and I nearly fell to my knees.

Xander was laying there, his eyes closed as though he were sleeping, as though he were dreaming some soft, peaceful dream.

I choked on a sob, unable to move as I waited for his chest to rise and fall, but it didn't.

I was too late.

I was far too late.

His body was cold to the touch, his wounds no longer bleeding. I rushed to him, my hands on either side of his face as I begged him to breathe. I sliced open my palm and dropped my blood into his mouth, but nothing happened.

Nothing happened.

Nothing.

"Xander!" I cried, gathering him into my arms and shaking him.

His body was bent in several impossible angles, covered in bite marks. Rage ripped through me as I screamed, screamed like I myself was being torn to shreds. Not him... oh Goddess, not him.

I didn't notice the people in the room until I heard Narcissa's voice cut through my screaming. She was holding her brother up by his hair, a strange blade made of what looked like polished bone in her hand. She cut his head off in one swing, and his body fell to the floor.

Kiern had her arms around me, and Oliver was at my side, but I couldn't hear his voice. All I could hear was a gentle hum of energy filling the room, and my ears began to ring.

"He's dead," I cried, over and over. "He's dead. Oliver—"

Oliver grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me violently, then yanked the chain that held the sunstone from my neck until it snapped.

"Use it, girl," Narcissa purred behind me. "Bring this castle to the ground. Shatter this realm."

How? What would I offer it? What could I possibly offer it?

I clutched it with one hand as I caressed Xander's cheek with the other.

“We’ll see each other again,” I sobbed.

Then, I gave myself to the realm of the Gods, in exchange for Xander’s life.