

Kings Breeder 621

CHAPTER 621 : THE MARK IS GONE

Xander

“Xander!”

I swung wildly into the dark, my clenched fist meeting with the side of someone’s jaw. My knuckles cracked against bone, my skin splitting with the impact. I roared with fury, fear, and pain.

I couldn’t see anything. Why couldn’t I see anything? Someone was holding me down, voices erupting nearby, all around.

“Sedate him—”

“Stick him with that needle, and it’ll be the last thing you ever do!”

Adrian’s voice rang through my ears, and I gasped, bucking against whoever or whatever was holding me down.

“I can’t see,” I rasped, whipping my head from side to side, “Adrian!”

“I’m here, Alpha.” I felt Adrian’s grip on my forearm and momentarily relaxed before reality rushed back to me, taking my breath away.

I thrashed against what felt like several people holding me down, the voices surrounding me now shouting in desperation to be heard.

“Xander, listen to me—”

“Where is Lena? Where—where am I?” I cut Adrian off, unable to hide the panic in my voice.

I felt a gentle touch against my cheek, someone with soft, feminine hands. For a moment I thought it was Lena, my heart skipping a beat and then breaking as someone else’s scent hit me.

“Take a breath,” Rosalie whispered, and I did, my body surrendering to her words while my mind fought against them. She reached to the back of my head and fumbled in my hair for a moment, then I felt fabric slide loose and graze my cheekbones as light flooded my eyelids.

I blinked frantically to adjust to the bright light overhead, some kind of lamp shining directly in my face.

My eyes began to adjust to the light as several shadowed figures hovered over me, their faces blurred and distorted.

“Are you going to freak out if we let you go?” Rosalie asked lightly, her voice warm and motherly as she gently tucked a lock of my hair behind my ear.

I shook my head, or attempted to, the act sending a ripple of searing pain down my spine. I felt everyone holding me down ease up on their grip, and I shot straight upward in a seated position, screaming in agony.

“Damn it—his sutures!”

“Xander, lay back down!”

“Xander, listen to me—”

I couldn't differentiate the voices around me as my mind spun and my vision blurred with black spots. I fell back again, panting as heat coursed over my skin. I felt everything—every scratch, every bruise, every break... every bite.

“The Night Realm—” I choked.

Rosalie shushed me as though I was a sleepy child, her touch the only thing keeping me shaking uncontrollably.

“You're in Breles, Xander.”

Oliver. Oh, my Goddess, that was Oliver's voice, muffled and wet like he was speaking with a mouth full of water. I blinked into the light, my vision clearing enough to catch a glimpse of him standing behind several unfamiliar people. He was pressing an ice pack to his jaw, his skin sporting a deep purple bruise around the white plastic holding the ice.

“Did I punch you?” I asked stupidly. My ears began to ring violently, and I couldn't hear his reply, but based on the look in his eyes, I was sure that I'd split my knuckles open on his jaw only minutes ago. “You're alive.”

“Unfortunately—ow!” Oliver hissed as he was nudged hard in the ribs by none other than his mother, who was hovering next to him, pale as a ghost.

I looked around the area, noticing the shredded canvas ceiling. I could see the stars above me, the sky fading into dawn. I was in a tent—one of the war tents in the camp in Breles. I was... I was in a healer tent, surrounded by....

I locked eyes with a man dressed in a white coat soiled with blood. His eyes were narrowed on me, but not in a menacing way. He was watching me closely, scanning me from head to toe.

I wasn't prepared for what I saw when I looked down at my body. I gasped, then panicked, and hands came flying to hold me down again as I struggled to catch my breath.

Thick, black sutures ran from my wrists to my forearms. Gauze covered my legs, soaked with blood. My chest was bare and wrapped in criss-crossed bandages. I didn't know what my face looked like, and maybe it was a good thing, because when Adrian let go of my arm again I reached up to touch my cheek, then my forehead, and felt along the thick bandages wrapped around my skull.

I'd been shredded. I'd been flayed open.

“You've had three doses of my blood,” Rosalie said, giving me a weak smile. “It... it kept you alive—”

“What the f**k happened? How did I get here?”

“It's a long story,” Oliver huffed.

Adrian shot him a careful look, and Oliver's eyes dropped to the floor.

“Where the f**k is Lena?”

“Luna,” came a male voice from just outside the tent.

Maeve’s head whipped in his direction and she stepped away, speaking in low tones as she retreated out of sight. Through the ringing in my ears, I could hear the sounds of a distant battle. I thought...

“The portal is closed,” Oliver said flatly, his voice void of emotion.

“Lena—”

“Me,” Oliver said sharply, his eyes fixed on mine. He straightened up, something flashing in his eyes that I didn’t recognize as he held my gaze for a moment longer, then he walked away, pushing through the crowd of people who were gathered around the cot I was laying on.

Adrian’s hand clutched my shoulder; his face turned to watch Oliver go. Everyone was silent for a moment before the healer cleared his throat. “I really need to continue patching him up,” he said, every word laced with annoyance. I hadn’t registered the Egoren warriors standing in the group until Adrian tilted his head toward the tent flap, and six men walked outside—guards. They had been here to guard....

“The vampires are still here—”

“We’re taking Breles back,” Rosalie replied, nodding at the healer, who turned his back to us and began rifling through a cart of supplies. “It’s nearly morning. It won’t be much longer until we can... until we can announce a victory.”

I felt a pinch, and Adrian snarled audibly as the healer, who I hadn’t seen step toward me again, retreated a few steps, a syringe in his hand.

“I just f*****g told you—” Adrian growled, nearly foaming at the mouth with rage.

“He can’t be awake for this,” the healer replied flatly.

I swallowed against the panic rising in my throat as I painfully turned my head to look up at Adrian, who was seething.

“For what? What—”

Fatigue was rushing over my body, threatening to take me under. I fought against the darkness creeping into my mind, the numbness making it hard to breathe.

It might have been instinctual, or maybe habit, but before I succumbed to sedation, I reached up to touch Lena’s mark on my shoulder.

Pain flowed beneath my gentle touch. I met nothing but open flesh, and oozing wound.

“No!”

“Close your eyes, Xander,” Rosalie said, her voice trembling with emotion.

“No...” My voice was nothing but a strained, forced whisper. Through the numbness taking over my body, I could feel the anger roiling. Her mark, her mark that had cemented us as mates—it was f*****g gone, cut out of me, torn from me.

I opened my mouth as the light above me began to fade. I might have screamed. I might have roared like the wolf struggling to gain control inside of me.

“When is he returning to the camp?” I asked the healer, a different one from the man who’d done his best to sew the gaping hole in my shoulder together only hours ago.

The new healer, an older woman with a round, somewhat plain face but striking dark brown eyes, only shrugged at my inquiry. “This is war. There is no schedule,” she replied tersely, motioning for me to relax so she could redress the bandages covering my body.

“I need to speak to him,” I said through gritted teeth as she pulled the blood soaked bandages from my chest, revealing deep, jagged puncture wounds—bite marks, hundreds of them, all over my body.

“Like I said an hour ago,” she breathed, annoyance flashing behind her eyes, “I don’t know when he’ll be returning.”

I exhaled, nostrils flaring as I relaxed against the pillows, tapping my fingers on the side of my cot and wincing as she not-so-gently splashed what felt like a bucket of rubbing alcohol over my wounds.

“f**k!” I hissed, but she didn’t bat an eyelash.

She looked like she’d seen worse, much worse.

I turned my head toward the tent flap as the opening darkened, and Rowan stepped forward, his eyes bloodshot and edged with black circles. He looked like hell. He looked like he’d seen hell for himself. He also didn’t look thrilled to see me.

“I’ll let these air out for a while,” the healer said curtly, casting me a sharp-eyed glare before she walked away. She bobbed her head at Rowan before disappearing through the tent flap.

I would have made a comment on how much this new healer despised me, but there was no humor in this situation whatsoever. Rowan looked pissed, and he roughly grabbed a flimsy wooden stool from the side of the tent and took a seat next to the bed, his arms crossed over his chest.

“Where is Lena?” I asked before he could say anything. His eyes darkened, his chest heaving a breath that he blew out through his teeth.

“Not here,” he said, his blue eyes meeting my own. They were Lena’s eyes, but a deep cobalt that shone like gems in the afternoon light pouring through the shredded ceiling, not the pale gray I loved.

“What do you mean, not here?”

“She didn’t make it back before...” Rowan struggled to finish the sentence, his face falling with an describable pain that tore through me.

“What?” I choked. “No—”

“I don’t know what else to say,” Rowan said, his voice cracking. He cleared his throat, standing up and turning toward the tent flap. He hesitated, his fists clenching and unclenching as though he were about to say something else.

“What happened?” I asked, but my words fell in the stale air.

He was already gone, the tent flap rustling as he brushed past.

I heaved another breath and strained against the stiffness in my legs as I twisted in the cot and got my feet on the ground. Pain, that was it. It just hurt. Nothing was broken. Nothing was so severely wrong that it wouldn’t prevent me from walking out of this tent and grabbing the f*****g Alpha King of Valoria by his collar.

But something had been severely wrong. I could feel the remnants of death lingering in my body as I stood, swayed, and caught myself on one of the posts holding up the tent. I knocked over a cart of medical supplies as I swung a barely functioning arm toward a stack of pants and shirts, likely for the healers to change into, but I didn’t care.

I dressed, much slower than I would have liked, and the shirt grazed against my wounds as I pulled it over my head.

I was barefoot, but I didn’t care. I didn’t care about anything but finding out where my mate was, and how the f**k I ended up here when she hadn’t.

I staggered out of the tent, momentarily blinded by the afternoon sun that was beating down on the camp. It was... warm, very warm. And as my eyes adjusted to the sunlight, I noticed flashes of green grass creeping along the edges of the tents.

Spring.

But, it had been... it had been early April when Oliver and I went to Crimson Creek. How long had I been out? This far north, spring shouldn’t have arrived until at least late May.

Based on the way my muscles protested my staggering limp away from the medical tent, it had been a while.

“Xander.”

I turned around, nearly falling over out of shock.

An old man walked up to me, steadying me with a hand on

CHAPTER 622 : SHE’S GONE

Xander

Henry led me through the camp with one arm wrapped around my waist as I limped along. I wondered how long it would be until the healers found out I was missing, but I didn’t particularly care.

I was in shock at the fact that Henry was here. I know that he, without a doubt, would tell me everything he knew about what happened.

We crossed what used to be a street and walked into one of the market squares dappled around Breles. It was all rubble now, the buildings toppled, and the road split down the center. Ash covered everything in sight, and in the distance, smoke continued to rise. Utter destruction—that was the only way to describe this place, this once great city.

“The Alpha of Breles is dead,” Henry said as he eased me down onto a piece of rubble shaped like a chair. The rebar grazed my back as I shifted my weight, wincing as my skin pulled around the thick sutures covering my body. I’d be scarred from this, forever, in a lot of different ways. I wondered, as I met Henry’s eye, if I would ever be the same again... if anyone would after what we’d all witnessed.

I nodded in response to Henry’s announcement. I didn’t really care. Lots of Alphas had fought alongside their warriors. It was likely the Alpha of Breles wasn’t the only leader sharing a grave with the fallen.

“There was one final push before the portal fell,” Henry said, settling down next to me with a groan. He extended his legs in front of him, his ankles crossed and his hands folded in his lap. “The Death Walkers were pushed out of Breles shortly after Lena and Oliver crossed over, but they ripped the city

to shreds in the process. It was a bloody battle... so much death, on both sides. Hope looked as though it was lost until... well, Lena’s aunt, the Luna of Poldesse? She came storming to the frontlines with a small force behind her and fought alongside her husband until dawn. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Maeve?” I said, a vision of her decked out in armor and wielding a sword and shield came to mind. I imagined her running into battle, flanked by warriors in their wolf forms as she tore through the lines of vampires trying to take back the city.

“Yes, that one. The battle took place until the early hours of the morning. Everyone able to stand or shift and fight was out on the front lines. Every vampire that had taken refuge in the rubble was out hunting, and soon the streets were filled with blood and gore and... Xander, I didn’t think our kind would win this war. Not until...” He paused, swallowing hard as he gathered his thoughts.

“The sky split in two just before dawn, a great, but silent, explosion. It sent a wave of light across Breles, illuminating even the darkest recesses of the city. The Death Walkers turned to ash, and the battle just... ended, just like that.” He snapped his fingers.

I pursed my lips, fighting against the pain throbbing through my body as I listened to his words.

“Why?”

“Why what? Why the spray of light? Why did the vampires turn to ash?”

“Both,” I said flatly.

Henry shrugged, tapping his fingers on his thigh. “There has been talk from the refugee camp in Crimson Creek about the significance of the moment. All lower vampires, you know, none of them died like the Death Walkers. They say it’s because the Death Walkers were made by the king, or his kind,

other High Vampire gods, and the like. The king died; he must have, and those connected to him just... poof!” Henry waved a hand in the air.

“How did I get back here?” I asked. Henry ran his tongue over his lip, looking me up and down without answering. “How did YOU get back here?”

"I walked right out of the realm," he breathed. "Every night I watched wave after wave of lower vampires leave their underground kingdoms. I could see it all from my perch on the mountain. I followed their trail during the daytime, and then followed a group of them through the portal one day. It was just after you and Oliver torched the clearing outside of the portal, actually. Everyone was talking about it. The king pulled his forces back after that to guard his own castle. The young King of Brune is working with the Alpha Kings about making Crimson Creek a permanent settlement for his kind—"

"King of Brune?" I asked, an uneasy feeling settling in my gut. "Costas?"

"Who?"

"The King—"

"You mean Zeke? Tall, kind of gangly—"

"Zeke is not the king of Brune," I said with a chuckle, shaking my head.

"Rumor is he killed his father and took the throne when his father tried to sell out his kingdom to the Vampire King. He's somewhere in the camp right now, actually. He can walk around during the day, like one of us."

Because of the sunstone Lena had split into pieces, I remembered, giving one to Penny and one to Zeke.

My head was pounding now, the sunlight beating on my brow heating my skin and making me nauseous. I blinked, eyes watering. I could feel Henry's gaze on the side of my face, his eyes moving along the bandages wrapped around my skull.

"You arrived after the last battle," he said quietly. "Oliver and two other warriors were practically dragging you through the camp to get you to a healer tent. I went to the healer tent two days ago, shortly after you arrived. They wouldn't let me in, but I overheard what was being said. You were flayed open, Xander. You barely had a drop of blood left in you. The White Queen saved your life, that's true. But you shouldn't have still been alive to begin with. You shouldn't have survived the journey from Crimson Creek."

"Lena isn't here," I whispered, unsure if my words were even audible.

"Yes, I heard."

"Do you know if Prince Oliver has said anything about what happened? I need to know. I need to find her—"

"Xander," Henry interrupted, his voice laced with sadness. "The portal is closed."

"Oliver said he did it. He can open it again!"

"That realm is gone."

Henry's words hit me in the chest, tearing open any half-healed wounds as the pain ripped through my heart. I already knew that was the truth. I should have been able to feel Lena, even with her mark removed from my body. I should have been able to tug on that thread that tied us together to seek her out.

I would have felt her die.

But I felt nothing. She was just... gone. And I had no reason to believe she was ever coming back, not this time.

"She was pregnant." My voice cracked on the words. I felt Henry's hand flatten on the upper back.

"I'm sorry—"

"They should have just let me die," I seethed, sudden fury numbing the pain etched into every inch of my skin.

"I tried to stop them," Henry whispered. "I begged them to leave you alone—"

"Xander?"

I snapped my head up at the familiar voice coming from the other side of the clearing. Curly black hair caught in the afternoon sun as a young woman carrying a basket jogged over to me, pausing to let a trio of warriors walk past her.

Bethany slowed, squinting her eyes against the sun, and then let them go wide as she spotted Henry. She dropped the basket, sucking in her breath as she choked on a sob. Henry rose to his feet and walked over to her without a word, wrapping his arms around her.

Bethany was his daughter. She'd had her memory wiped, a deal that Henry made to stop her from becoming a hybrid. It was the same deal that Henry had made that kept him bound to Crimson Creek and the king, until now.

I wondered if Bethany remembered everything now that the king, and all of his dark magic, was gone.

Based on the look on her face as Henry wiped away her tears with his thumbs, I was willing to bet she did remember.

I struggled to my feet and turned away from them, hobbling back to the medical tent on my own. I waved away a group of warriors who approached to help me, and bared my teeth when they protested my refusal of their assistance.

The healer tent was only twenty yards or so away now, but every step was more painful than the other. I had a mind to keep walking until I reached the port, and keep walking still until I walked right off the edge of a dock. I couldn't swim like this, and I wouldn't even have tried. A wet, suffocating death seemed like a peaceful way to go instead of living out the rest of my life shattered over the loss of my mate and our unborn daughter.

Alexis. That was her name. That was the name Lena had given her before I left to gather reinforcements in Egoren weeks ago. I felt a rush of anger toward Lena all of the sudden, the fury so blinding I almost lost my balance and had to lean against a post of a nearby tent to catch my breath.

I didn't know what she'd done, but I felt in my soul that it had to do with the reason I was still alive. She knew... she had to have f*****g known that I would have rather died than live with the losses of my mate and child.

Was this a punishment? Had this been a final, sick game of ours? I squeezed my eyes shut, unsure if my mind was spinning out of rage or I was on the verge of passing out, but then I felt someone grab my arm and pull me to my feet.

“What are you doing?” Oliver hissed as he dragged me back to the medical tent. I didn’t open my eyes until I felt myself land back on the cot, the impact sending a fresh thrum of pain through me and causing me to gasp. “You’re making your injuries worse!”

“Good,” I groaned, heaving a breath as I opened my eyes.

“Good? Good?” Oliver was pissed. I doubted it had much to do with me.

“Shut the f**k up, and let me die in peace.”

“You’re not going to die, not anymore. My grandma made sure of that. Lena—”

“Unless you’re going to tell me what she did, I don’t want to hear her name again.”

“You’ve got to be f*****g joking,” Oliver sneered as he gripped the stool next to the bed. He flung it across the tent and sent it flying into the tent next to ours, where a murmur of alarm sounded from beyond. “What, you’re mad at her? For saving your f*****g life?”

“She sacrificed herself and our child—”

“You don’t know s**t!”

“Then tell me, for the love of the f*****g Goddess, tell me what happened!”

Oliver was breathing sharply through his nose, his face reddened with fury. He’d lost all traces of the enthusiastic, somewhat aloof man I’d come to know very well, and considered a friend. His gem-like eyes were nothing like they used to be. They were dead now, black and empty.

The stool came sailing back through the backside of the tent and Oliver caught it with one hand, and promptly sat down on it, running his fingers through his hair.

“Before I tore down the portal,” he breathed, meeting my eye, “Lena used the sunstone.”

Chapter 623 : The Night God

Lena

“Easy now, not too fast. That’s it—”

The Night God patted my back as I gulped for breath, shivering in the stunning cold that was embracing me like a wet blanket. I opened my eyes, sucking in a shallow breath as I looked around.

“What’s going on?” I cried, rising to my knees.

The withered old man pursed his lips, his hands stuffed in the pockets of his khaki trousers as he looked down at me with a fatherly look of disapproval.

“You offered yourself to the sunstone in exchange for Xander’s life, remember?” he quipped, shrugging his shoulders.

I blinked up at him, then looked around once more, taking in the familiar space.

I was in the ancient temple of the White Queens, the one tucked inside an ice-covered cove only accessible in the dead of winter, the same temple we'd passed through to journey between Andromeda's realm and my own.

"Why am I here?" I looked toward where the doors should be, one on either end, but found none. The walls were cold and empty, covered in cobwebs.

The Night God plopped down in one of the dusty pews, stretching out his legs in front of him as he sighed audibly. He didn't move like an old man at all, I realized.

"Because I didn't think it was very fair to give up your entire mortal existence to save someone's life when he shouldn't have been in that position anyway," he answered calmly, almost casually.

"So this isn't the realm of the gods?"

"Of course not. This is just another pocket between the realms the gods created to play house, Lena. You can access the realm of the gods all you want without a sunstone, you know. So can your mother, and every... what do you call them? Dream Dancer? Ha, such an odd name for what it really is."

I was genuinely stunned into speechlessness. I stared up at the man, the god, who looked more like someone I'd run into at the grocery store than a being with unlimited power.

"Xander is one of the good ones, Lena. His powers of shadow are not weak like he thinks; he just has a better grip on them than his relatives and ancestors. He could have saved himself. He could have killed my good-for-nothing son without so much as touching him. Do you know why he didn't?"

I shook my head as he leaned forward, his hands resting on his knees.

"Because Xander knows what he's capable of but refuses to accept that he's dark at heart. Does that make sense?"

"Barely—"

"All of the descendants of Lycaon have been the same," the Night God breathed, shaking his head.

"Lycaon wasn't a bad person, not totally, not until paranoia and greed took hold of him and twisted him into what he became toward the end of his life. That was the curse he passed down through his line, you know. It was fear—fear of his family, fear of his own powers, fear of what was to come when he passed across to the spirit realm. Xander was the first person ever born of Lycaon's line to never fear or doubt his powers. He was the only person to ever rein those powers in and render them obsolete

with only the power of his will. He didn't let his powers consume him, heart and soul, like his relatives. He never needed you to save him from himself, like those that came before."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because it was incredibly stupid of you to doubt him, Lena."

I blanched, then glared at the god, who only chuckled beneath his breath and crossed his ankles.

"I'm supposed to become the Moon Goddess. That's my destiny, the reason I was born. The gods wanted me back, and I made the decision to give myself to them so Xander could live—"

"I created the Moon Goddess," he said flatly, leaning back against the pew. "The gods don't have a use for you, not in their realm. Not yet. You would have just been another soul drifting through space and time waiting for a home. You were meant for your own realm, Lena. One day, when you're old and withered and wise, you will return to the gods and sit atop your throne in the sky and play house and gossip with them all, alright? But not now."

"Gossip?"

"Yes, gossip. What do you think prophecies are, Lena? They're not some cemented plan, that's for sure. I knew there would be a war like this one. I only knew that because I could see the beginnings of it in my own realm when my children were young and unruly. They wanted more, always, like all children do, but I couldn't give that to them, not all of them. I would have bent the world to Narcissa and Andromeda's whims. I would have done the same for my son Typhon but—" he heaved an uneasy breath, shaking his head. "Nikolas wasn't as powerful as the rest of the children of the night realm. When I created the lower vampires, he saw an opportunity to rule them like he believed I was ruling him. Then, Andromeda and Morrighan..."

"Tell me about that," I said quickly, sliding down from my knees onto my bottom. "Tell me how my realm plays into all of this."

"There's not much to say—"

"But that's wrong," I argued. "You created the Moon Goddess, who created my realm—"

"I gifted her your realm," he corrected, sniffing indignantly.

"Why? Didn't that cause you to be banished by the other gods?"

"Who told you all of this?"

"Your daughter," I said, raising my brows.

He exhaled through his nose, shaking his head.

"Before your people were wolves, they were just human. They had no powers, no religion, other than pagan instincts to worship things that gave them life, like food and water. They followed the wolves because the wolves led them to food, you see. They began to worship the wolves like gods. Leto was one of those early people, but she was different from the rest. She had a... natural talent for healing. She was never afraid. I watched her stare death in the face many times, and she never once backed down. A blight swept through her village one winter and killed almost everyone. Even gripped by the illness, Leto never once gave up caring for the sick. She buried all of the dead, every man, woman, and child, until her hands were raw and bleeding. Then, she started to succumb to the illness, and I couldn't—I wasn't ready—"

"You loved her?"

"I did, very much so. I came to her village in the form of a black wolf. Everyone assumed I was death itself, coming to take the rest of them. But I knew Leto wouldn't fear me. I lured her out of her village

into the barren, snow-covered tundra. I gave her a moon stone, a sacred gem tied to me as the God of Night in particular. She took the stone, and through it I gifted her the powers of healing so she could save the remaining villagers. She would live, and for me, that was enough.”

“And...”

“And, I underestimated her, Lena, if you must know. She drew every power from the stone she wore around her neck over the course of her young life. I came to her often as a wolf. I came to her more than I should have. Once, I changed from that wolf to man, and she was... obsessed with that transformation. She wanted to do it, to be like that. And so, she was.”

“But, didn’t the moon stone grant her immortality?”

“No,” he said quickly, his eyes downcast. “That’s not the truth.”

“Then what is the truth?”

His eyes fixed on mine, violent and flaked with stars. “Wolves follow a hierarchy. They mate for life. When Leto blessed her people with the mate bond I knew... I knew what she was trying to accomplish. She wanted to keep her people safe. The villages were constantly at war over countless things. Being like the wolves, being a pack, that kept them loyal and safe. The people who found their mates tended to stay in the village; they tended to breed and grow families, which meant the villages prospered. She found her mate, and it nearly killed me. She had her twins and I felt like ripping the world in two. Her mate grew old, her children grew... but she didn’t age with them. I’d selfishly kept her as she was when I first gave her the moonstone, because I wanted her. I loved her. And I loved her so much that my last gift to her was something I knew would have me cast out of the Realm of the Gods for good.”

“You made her and her family immortal—”

“I made them gods,” he finished, shaking his head. “You know the rest. You know her mate’s treachery. You know how her son betrayed her. You know of Morrighan and Lycaon’s battle across the pack lands. I gave them their own realm, you know, your realm of light. I gave Leto that power, but she never used it. Lycaon was the realm builder, the only one to tap into that power. Like me, that was his last gift to his people before he met his mortal end. The powers of the stones aren’t forever. He lived for hundreds of years and fought for more time until his dying breath. He was the one who instilled fear in his line. Darkness wasn’t his curse; it was fear.”

“And Morrighan?”

“Morrighan had a mortal life and death because love was her reason for living,” he said quickly. “She loved and lived and loved some more, until the day she died as an old woman. That is the gift of her line, love. And love is the reason I stopped you from throwing yourself at the feet of the gods. One day, Lena, you will return. You’ll return to me, and we’ll look out over our creation and laugh about this war. But now, you need to live. You need to raise your child and rule your lands. Your gifts are enormous. You were born with them. Leto was given them. Do you understand the difference?”

He got to his feet, his eyes searching mine for understanding.

“You’re saying Leto wasn’t a true Goddess?”

“Only in name—she was a Goddess only in name. It’s her legacy that people worship. It’s the residual powers that seeped into your realm that gift your kind with their mate bonds and magic.”

“But Leto went back to the Realm of the Gods—”

“When she broke the moon stone out of anger, she relinquished her powers. She aged rapidly, and was on the brink of death when I came to her. I offered her... I offered life, and she refused. Her last wish, her last use of those failing powers, was to turn her people into wolves so they could take care of themselves. She died a mortal, her bones are dust, ash.”

Mortal. I felt my stomach tighten around the word, like everything I knew about my world had just been a fairy tale, a lie, a myth.

But I was born this way. My powers weren’t given. He’d said so himself.

“What am I supposed to do?” I cried. “I’ve never known. I’ve never known why I am the way I am and what I’m meant to do—”

“You’re meant to live,” he breathed, extending a hand.

I took it, and he helped me upright and led me to the back of the temple, where an altar rose from the floor. He pointed to the base of the altar, where a carving of a flower was etched into the stone. I recognized it immediately—a moonlight lily, clear as day.

“You were born as one of us, Lena. Maybe it was Leto’s final gift, possibly a gift to me, if I’m being honest... someone to rule the night with when the time comes, because it couldn’t have been her, despite how badly I wanted it. But it’s not your time, and I won’t rob you of the same life I desperately wanted for myself.”

My heart broke around his words. The God of Night wasn’t a monster. He was lovesick and grieving over a woman who couldn’t reciprocate his feelings, still to this day.

“Your uncle found Lycaon’s altar, but he didn’t know how to access what was inside. He didn’t have the blood of Lycaon. You have Lycaon and Morrighan’s blood.” I felt a sharp pain on my palm, and before I could blink he’d sliced through my skin. I bristled, but he motioned toward the carving. “Place your hand on it.”

I did so without hesitating, and the altar immediately began to glow, its flat surface turning to a well of sparkling blue-hued light, like a pool of water.

I looked into the water, and what I saw brought tears to my eyes.

“You’re not the only one with gifts,” he smiled. “And I think you owe it to him not to have done what he had to do in vain.”

I closed my eyes as tears fell down my cheeks.

“How do I get home?”

Chapter 624 : Pain of the Aftermath

Oliver

Xander was a f*****g mess in every way.

He was just staring at me as he sat on the cot, his eyes narrowed on my face as I did my best to explain what had happened, what I'd done, and why.

I could barely form the words. He wasn't the only one who had lost their mate. He wasn't the only one who'd lived, while the other part of their soul was left behind in a realm that no longer existed.

I hadn't had a choice. It was Lena's life or the lives of many... hundreds of thousands of lives, to be exact.

I knew in my soul that Lena would've wanted it this way. She made that decision for herself the moment she gripped that pale yellow stone in her hands and whispered beneath her breath to spare Xander's life in place of her own.

I had been furious. I leaped for her but crashed into the blood-soaked ground in King Nikolas's castle, and Lena had been gone.

It was Narcissa who whispered frantically in my ear, her long silver fingers wrapping around my upper arm. "We need to go, wolf prince. You are the one to end this."

Me. It was going to have to be me.

A single whisper from Narcissa swept our group from the castle to the entrance of the portal in a split second. All around us the Death Walkers, those gray and molting vampires, turned to ash and dust. Their king's death had spurred a massive die-off in that realm, but I didn't have a moment to ponder the significance of it, not at the time.

I felt her then, my mate. It was a desperate tug on the weak bond I'd felt in my heart my entire life. I hadn't even had a chance to lay eyes on her. I hadn't spoken a single word to her. Until that point, her existence was just a fleeting hope in my heart. I had hoped, wished, that one day we'd meet. Maybe after the war, or even during.

She was still there, in that realm of blood.

Save one, or many?

I cleared my throat as I looked up at Xander, who was waiting for me to continue.

"John, Colton, and the rest of the warriors Lena and I brought through the portal brought you back to our realm. I watched them pass through. Queen Kiern was forced by Narcissa to cross over as well, and she did, tearfully, begging Narcissa for more time. I don't know how long we stood there as the last of the lower vampires crossed that portal, running for their lives. It was the worst thing I've ever seen, Xander. Absolutely f*****g heartbreaking."

"Zeke and Penny?" he asked, and I nodded, tilting my head to the side as I let go of a breath.

"They were some of the last. Zeke was covered in blood, flanked by Penny and a few lower vampire males I didn't know—guards, royal guards, by the looks of it. They crossed through, and they were the last to come. I waited for what felt like hours."

“Why did you wait?”

“I was waiting for my mate,” I breathed. I had no tears left to cry. My body and mind were numb, emotionless; there was nothing back darkness left. Maybe it would always be like this now. Maybe that was a blessing.

Xander shifted his weight, flexing his hands over his lap.

“Narcissa took me by the hand and told me it was time. She told me the king still had warriors in my own realm. She said there would always be conflict between the two realms. New kings would rise, new threats would make themselves known. More would die, as they were dying now, in Breles. I told her to cross through.”

“You were going to—”

“I was going to stay, and close the portal from the... I was going to close myself in.”

Xander said nothing in response. He continued to stare, his face void of expression but darkening around my words as I continued.

“There won’t be anything left of this realm,” Narcissa had told me, urging me to follow her. “It’s over. It’s done. When you close that portal, my father will destroy it all. I made him a deal. I said I would get my people out before he ended this. I’ve done my part. You must come with me, wolf. You must.”

But I didn’t move. I refused. The beautiful, terrifying woman in front of me pleaded with me, begging me at one point on her knees. A Goddess in her own right, on her knees in front of a mere mortal.

“You will be a great king one day,” she’d continued. “Your rule will be nothing but peace and joy for all of your people—”

“There is no joy,” I had replied, growing furious at her bribery, “if I have no mate to rule beside.... And if my cousin is dead...”

“Your family cannot suffer another loss,” she pleaded.

That had struck a chord with me. I thought of my mother, my father... my brothers. Will would likely not even care, no tears staining his cheeks. But Charlie and Lucas?

Rowan and Hanna had lost their only daughter—their only child.

The only thing that got my feet moving toward that portal was the notion that it needed to be me to break the news, to tell them the truth about what Lena had done, for all of us, and what she’d sacrificed.

I felt the mate bond tug one more time as I looked over my shoulder into the realm of the vampires, and then I crossed over.

Chaos... full night... hybrids were attacking the refugee camps and our warriors were doing their best to defend the lower vampires who had crossed to seek refuge.

Narcissa let out a blood curdling scream, sensing the death and suffering of the people she had loved. She’d never been their ruler. She’d been a god to them, a mother.

The portal was their last tether to the king and their realm. The guards and beasts had died along with their king in the realm of blood, why not here? Was it because the portal was still open? Was it that the last remnants of the magic that bound them to the king wasn't able to cross over the field of energy and starlight?

Something snapped inside of me as I watched Narcissa run toward Crimson Creek, her silver dress billowing out behind her. Warriors stood in shock as she passed, their weapons drawn but frozen, useless.

Grief—this whole realm was embraced in crushing grief. We had years of rebuilding and recovery in front of us. We'd have countless dead to bury, countless children to care for who would be growing up without parents who had died in the bloodshed.

People would be displaced. I'd burned some of those villages and towns. I'd burned homes down the foundations, dinners left on dining room tables like they'd fled before sitting down to eat. Children's toys had charred and melted, books and paintings had turned to ash.

I raised my hands toward the portal and let every ounce of power running through my veins burst forward, unsure of how, or why, I knew this was something I was capable of.

We were showered in a blinding light. I saw my own birth through my own eyes, the very first thing I saw was my grandmother, Rosalie, hovering over me. She'd been so young then, twenty-two years ago. She'd saved my life. She held my tiny face between her hands and breathed life into me when I should have died right there, in that little cot, separated from my mother, who was dying across the room.

"You will do great things," my grandmother had said through endless tears.

The vision faded in another flash of searing light, and I opened my eyes to find myself flat on my back, a hush falling over the scorched clearing.

"We drove you back to Breles," I told Xander, leaning forward to rest my elbow on my knees, hands hanging between them. "You were dying. I wanted to just let you die. I should have, and I'm sorry for it. It was John and Colton who refused to not render you aide."

Xander gave me a tight nod, his throat bobbing as he swallowed. I noticed how his eyes glistened with emotion, but I said nothing. He could still feel, which was good. Maybe he'd heal from this, from his loss and his injuries, and move on.

I never would. I knew that much. I felt it in my bones. I'd thrown every fiber of my being into closing that portal. I had nothing left inside of me now. I was empty. I was broken. I deserved to be this way, forever. I'd sacrificed my mate, a woman I would never have the opportunity to know, to save my home.

The healer came back inside the tent and shot me the dirtiest look I'd ever seen. I didn't care. I was beyond caring about anything.

I rose from the stool and walked out into the camp, leaving Xander in the care of the healer. I wandered aimlessly for a long time, avoiding those I knew, my own family. I ended up in a part of Breles I recognized as the university district, which was nothing more than rubble and charred buildings now. I sat on the edge of a cracked fountain and looked out at the wide expanse of destruction.

The sun was shining, a bluebird day, not a single cloud in the sky. It was spring, and even through the rubble, sparks of green had begun to bloom.

Life would go on. Time would pass. Days would turn to weeks, then months, then years. It was already happening.

I watched a caravan of armored trucks roll past, moving toward the outskirts of the city to Crimson Creek. The trucks were piled high with supplies, food and water and medicine. A flickering of warmth sparked in my heart but was quickly stanchied by the ebbing blackness taking over my body. My kind... they'd care for the vampires who had escaped the hell they'd been enslaved in. They would be safe. I would see to that myself, if need be.

I felt someone's presence nearby and turned my head, rushing to my feet in shock. Alma was standing only a few paces away, her face shielded by a hood, her skin cover covered by thick dark clothing and gloves.

"I thought you were dead," I said, my voice cracking around the words.

"I underestimated you," she replied, reaching out to squeeze my hand. "I'm going back to Crimson Creek. There's someone I need you to meet."

Chapter 625 : I'm Not a Ghost

Lena

I was home; how, I didn't know. I'd simply opened my eyes and found myself lying on my back looking up at a star-flecked sky, turning my head to see the muted lights of Crimson Creek in the distance. Some of the grand estates dotting the horizon had lights glistening in their windows, and a sense of peace washed over me as I sat up, hugging my knees.

I was still dressed in the warrior garb I'd been wearing when I first passed through the portal. I knew the portal was no longer there; I couldn't feel it. There was no longer an unearthly pull toward the sweeping hills outside of Crimson Creek. It was quiet, still, and peaceful.

Gideon's house rose against the horizon as I made my way through the hills. Below me, Crimson Creek was awash in activity. Hundreds, if not thousands, of people moved between black tents, lanterns bobbing as they made their way through the dark. Armored trucks were stationed around the village, and I could see shadowed figures passing out boxes into waiting hands.

Our kind was helping the lower vampires who had escaped. They had nowhere else to go now. This was their home, as much as it was ours.

My chest tightened as I continued my slow walk to Gideon's property. I didn't know why I felt like I needed to go there first. It seemed like the right thing to do. I wanted to check in with my friends and find out what had happened in my absence, however long that had been.

I opened the rusted gate at the end of Gideon's driveway and looked up at the house. Someone was sitting on the porch steps, their body casting a long shadow across the moonlit front yard. They looked up at me, and I saw a flash of copper as the figure stood, stepping into the light.

“Lena,” Oliver breathed in disbelief.

I gave him a weak smile, noticing the lines of grief and exhaustion lining his face as he walked forward. He looked as though he wasn’t sure I was actually there, his eyes wide and skeptical as he took me in.

“I’m not a ghost,” I said softly, my eyes leaving his to catch a flicker of movement behind the windows in the house, which were drenched in a pale amber glow. Several people were inside, and my heart leaped in my throat as I realized Xander might be one of them. “Is he here?”

“No,” Oliver replied. He knew exactly who I was talking about. His voice softened as he said, “He’s in Breles, recovering.”

“Is he alright?”

Oliver was only a few feet away from me now. He stopped walking, his face flushing with color as he reached out his hand and grazed my sleeve with his fingertips. He let out his breath in a whoosh and jumped back a step.

“I’m not a ghost,” I repeated, noticing the slight tremble that rippled over his body for a moment. He didn’t pull me into a hug like I thought he would. His skeptical expression didn’t change, not a bit. My heart squeezed as I looked into his eyes, noticing the usual fire was gone. “Are you alright?”

“Come inside,” he said without a hint of emotion. I exhaled deeply, clenching my fists at my sides as I opened my mouth to say his name and demand that he tell me what was wrong, but he turned away, heading back into the house without so much as a word.

It wasn’t that I hadn’t known what he’d done. I’d seen it in the shimmering altar, a vision of Oliver bringing down the portal. He’d done so without a glimmer of emotion in his eyes. Oliver, who’d been the

epitome of sunshine, was nothing but a shell of himself now, and it broke my heart.

He wouldn’t be the only one left with scars. This was likely the most brutal war our kind had been through. Cities had been toppled; thousands were dead. I struggled to wrap my mind around the scope of the c*****e as I stepped into Gideon’s house and gazed upon the familiar faces staring right back at me.

Alma and Bethany were standing in the entrance to the kitchen, their faces smudged with flour. Bethany gave me a soft smile, her eyes glistening with tears. Alma looked stoic as always, a ghost of a smile touching her lips as she nodded in my direction.

Henry was seated in an armchair, sitting directly across from Ben, who was looking over his shoulder at me with a knowing smile on his face. Gideon’s brothers were next to the fireplace, their arms crossed over their chests.

Gideon reached out to take my hand and led me toward the staircase, nodding in a business-like fashion in a way of greeting.

“Dinner’s in a few minutes,” Bethany called out, but Gideon ignored her as he led me upstairs.

“Where are we going?” I asked, but before he could reply a man stepped out of one of the bedrooms and into the narrow hallway, his teeth bared—pointed teeth, a vampire.

“That’s enough, Lincoln,” Gideon said beneath his breath, coming to stop before the man. “She’s here to help.”

“I am?” I asked weakly, thoroughly confused.

Lincoln, tall and dark haired with a handsome if not menacing face glowered at me, then reluctantly stepped aside to allow me to cross the hallway into the bedroom he was guarding.

A soft cooing sound came from the bed, which was a tangle of sheets and quilts as my eyes moved from the foot of the bed to the young woman lying in it, her arms wrapped around a nursing infant. She had bright, pale gold hair that was braided loosely away from her face and shockingly green eyes that were fanned by dark lashes. Her cheeks were hollow, and scars ran up the length of her arms—bite marks, dozens of them.

I recognized her immediately, even though I’d never seen her in person. I didn’t think she was still alive.

“Carly,” I whispered, and some of the fear lining her features faded at the mention of her name. She swallowed weakly, glancing toward the doorway where the vampire male was now standing, watching our exchange with marked concern.

“Who are you?” she asked, her voice cracking with fear. The baby in her arms made a noise, and she gathered it defensively to her chest, wincing in pain. She was... ill, perhaps, or hurt. The baby was still a pale pink from birth, which had been recent. I turned around slowly, meeting Gideon’s gaze.

“Who is the father of that baby?” I asked, unable to hide the heat in my voice. I knew lower vampires could breed with wolves. Xander had said as much when he told me about Henry being Bethany’s father. I glanced up at Lincoln, my eyes narrowing into slits.

“Don’t hurt him,” Carly choked, a whimper escaping her lips.

Lincoln started forward, pushing me out of the way before I could react.

“Relax, my love. You need to rest—”

My love?

I turned around and watched as the vampire knelt beside the bed and caressed Carly’s cheek. Her eyes watered, her face twisting into a painful pout as she began to whimper. My gaze wandered past the couple to a cart full of supplies on the other side of the bed, and then to a trash bin in the corner of the room. Blood-soaked gauze was damn near spilling over the top of the bin. I glanced at Gideon, who had been following my gaze.

“The boy is only two hours old,” he said softly. “We haven’t been able to stop the bleeding, not yet.”

I looked back at Carly, who was indeed very pale. I heard Alma’s distinctive footsteps on the stairs and within a second she was in the doorway, holding a fresh set of towels and sheets under one arm and a tea tray balanced in the other.

“Oliver’s blood didn’t work,” Alma said without so much as looking at me as she bustled into the room, waving Lincoln away from Carly’s bedside. “We already tried.”

There was a whisper of sadness in Alma’s voice, which was exceedingly unusual for her. I glanced at her as she coaxed Carly to hand the baby to Lincoln so Alma could tend to her, but Carly was refusing.

That’s when I noticed the bloody sheets beneath Carly, and when I looked up I noticed Lincoln looking right at me.

“You want to know what happened to her?” he said without an ounce of kindness in his voice. Every word was dripping with malice, and I almost shuttered under the steel behind his gaze. “She was dragged by her hair into my realm, then beaten and used as a feeder. That man—that man who ran that estate in this realm sold her to the king, but his guards got to her first. I was a slave in his castle, a feeder as well. Some of us escaped at the same time his guards were having their way with her. We were able to stop them, and took her with us.”

My stomach tightened into a knot. Maxwell had told me that he’d fallen in love with Carly, but that had obviously been a lie. Fury burned behind Lincoln’s eyes as he continued, “We found refuge in one of the underground cities. We married, and I got her out before the portal came down. We went with the rest of the refugees.”

Carly had been missing for five years. I wondered if she knew just how long it had been, given that time worked differently between the two realms.

Tears were streaming down Carly’s face as Alma gently prodded her belly, and Alma turned to look up at me, a pleading look in her eyes.

I could see the gray color starting to creep over Carly’s skin and the yellowing of her eyes. Her lips were tinted a muted blue. She was dying.

Fire erupted in the pit of my stomach as I walked across the room and grabbed the unused tea cup sitting on the tray Alma had brought in the bedroom moments earlier. The wound on my hand from when I’d activated the altar was still fresh and barely healed. All I had to do was flex and then squeeze my hand to get the blood flowing again. I glanced at Lincoln, who paled as he watched me squeeze my blood into the teacup.

Alma was at my side suddenly, gently taking the teacup from me and replacing it with a length of sterile cloth to wrap around my hand. I gave her a strained smile in thanks, but her eyes were focused on the teacup as she reached into her apron and pulled out a vial full of inky black powder.

I smelled the blood root immediately, its acrid scent filling my nostrils, but then it was quickly replaced by the earthy scented tea Alma poured over the powder and my blood. She mixed the concoction, and I grimaced as she met my eye.

Nothing had looked more unappetizing, but it would likely save Carly’s life.

Lincoln was holding the infant in one hand and settling Carly into a seated position in the bed with the other, which Alma had dressed in fresh, clean sheets. The bloodied sheets were piled in the corner of the room, and I sucked in my breath at the sheer amount of blood staining the fabric. I looked at Carly, who was incredibly weak, barely able to keep her eyes open.

“Drink, darling,” Alma coaxed, lifting the teacup to Carly’s lips.

Carly barely had the strength to protest, and Alma wasn’t giving her an option to refuse. Alma didn’t stop tilting the potion into Carly’s mouth until it was gone. Lincoln patted the infant on his shoulder, glancing from Alma then back to Carly, his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

Carly’s lashes fluttered, and she mumbled something inaudible as she slumped against the pillows. I started forward, but Gideon caught me by the arm, shaking his head as Alma straightened her back and turned to us.

“Let them rest now,” Alma whispered. “We’ve done all we can do.”

Alma guided Gideon and me into the hallway, shutting the door behind us.

“Dinner is nearly ready—” Alma began, but I cut her off.

“Does she know how long she’s been gone? Has her family been told—”

“Warriors were sent to Breles with information about her whereabouts,” Gideon replied as we walked down the hallway towards the stairs. “Her father fought in Breles and hasn’t been located, and her mother was evacuated to Valoria. I don’t know if word has reached her.”

I had so much I wanted to talk to Carly about, so much I needed to know. But now was not the time. I wasn’t sure if I’d ever see her again.

“How long ago was that?” I asked. How long was I gone? How much time had passed while I was in the temple with the God of the Night?

“Two weeks ago. They came through with the last wave of refugees.”

“Two weeks,” I breathed, blinking back an onslaught of tears.

“Eat with us, Lena,” Alma demanded, taking me by the elbow.

“I need to go to Breles—”

“I’ll take you there myself, after dinner. I promise,” Gideon replied with a rare smile in my direction. “I have something to discuss with the Alpha of Egoren, anyway.”

Chapter 626 : No Time for Ghosts

Xander

Adrian was sitting at a makeshift desk made of pallets and wooden crates in the corner of my tent, his back arched as he looked down at a stack of documents that had been delivered to the tent this morning. He blew out his breath, straightening to his full height as he turned around with his hands on his hips.

“What are you going to say?”

“I don’t know,” I replied, stooping to finish tying the laces of my boots. The worst of my injuries had healed, and I’d had my sutures taken out three days ago. My body was still stiff and sore, but otherwise, I was on the mend.

But I was still numb from Lena's loss. The jagged scar running from my shoulder to my collarbone was red and bruised from the trauma of having her mark cut out of me, and then sewn shut.

She was gone, and I was still alive. I had no interest in living, and had I not been an Alpha I may have done something about that, but I had warriors to bring home, and a kingdom to rule.

I'd rule it alone, leaving no heir behind, no legacy.

"But this—"

"It's nothing, Adrian. It's not a big deal."

But it was a big deal, despite my attempts to shrug off the request of the Alphas of Lena's lands and the High Elder Council that helped mediate conflicts between the territories. They were asking for someone from Egoren to serve on the elder council, someone who would be willing to split their time between Egoren and the pack lands.

Ethan had included a personal note, requesting one man in particular—his half-brother.

I doubted Soren would be willing to do that. He had a life in Egoren—a family, and grandchildren. Hell, if I really wanted to off myself now, one of those kids could take over Egoren.

The thought fluttered in and out of my mind before I could blink, and I went back to getting dressed. Adrian rocked on his heels, turning away as I pulled a clean shirt over my head.

"Where's Abigail?" I asked, and he turned back around, a sly grin on his face.

"She's running some errands before we leave, sending some letters."

I nodded as I ran my fingers through my hair, ruffling the black curls dancing around my ears. I needed a haircut. I needed to shave. But all of that could wait until our warriors were on the warship taking us back to the portal to Egoren. We'd be leaving first thing in the morning, before the sun came up. I was more than ready to leave this realm and never look back.

Everything here reminded me of Lena. I hated it. I needed to leave.

I'd barely seen her family during the past week. Some of the royals had already returned to their territories, leaving behind their ambassadors to help with the cleanup in Breles and to oversee the resettlement of the displaced communities in the west. Everything south of the northern border was in shambles. Hundreds of thousands of people had no homes to go home to. I felt a pang of guilt at the thought of leaving behind such a mess, but I pushed it away, focusing on the task at hand.

"Are you going to sign it?" Adrian asked, jabbing a thumb toward the treaty on the desk.

I shrugged a shoulder, then shook my head. "I need to think about it. I found it unlikely we'll ever come back here, Adrian."

Adrian's eyes darkened for a moment, but he nodded nonetheless. We hadn't talked about Lena, but I knew Abigail was devastated.

“Make sure everyone reports to their tents tonight by 10:00 pm sharp. Whoever isn’t on the ship by 5:00 am gets left behind,” I said, sounding every ounce the Alpha that I was expected to be—no emotion, all business. It would stay that way. I would stay that way.

“Where are you going?”

“Out,” I replied before slipping through the tent flap. I was actually going to find a bottle of whiskey I could drown my sorrows in again, like I had for the past several nights in a row, unable to sleep. If I did sleep, it was nothing but nightmares, and based on the wailing and whimpering that erupted from the sprawling war camp near the port of Breles, I wasn’t the only one reeling from the devastation this war had caused.

I walked for a while, my hands tucked in my pockets. I caught a glimpse of Troy as he walked into a commander’s tent, his head bent as he talked rapidly to a man I didn’t recognize. He’d sent his wife back to the isles, kicking and screaming of course, and had stayed behind to help with the restoration of Breles. His eyes flicked up to mine before he disappeared into the tent, his expression softening as he gave me a gentle nod.

I’d miss Troy. I liked the man from the moment I met him. I’d miss his sons, too, especially Oliver.

But I hadn’t seen Oliver since he explained how he’d closed the portal. Last I heard, he was back in Crimson Creek. I doubted he had plans to return to Breles, or anywhere else for that matter. I didn’t blame him. I saw the pain in his empty eyes. I knew exactly what he was going through.

He could run away. I couldn’t. And sometimes, I was angry at him because of that.

I’d reached the dining tent, which was wide and shallow and full of warriors from every territory. I glanced at a few Egoren warriors who were seated at a table, mouthing “5:00 am” and tapping my wrist before I passed the tent completely. They nodded, their darkened eyes lined with fatigue. I needed to get them home, back to their families. I could grieve afterward. I had the rest of my life to live with regret.

There was something the warriors called the “fence” near the edge of the camp. It wasn’t actually a fence, but a darkened alley where warriors traded their meal and shower rations for bottles of booze, magazines, and cigarettes. I was a regular now, I realized. The empty bottles of whiskey collecting dust under the cot in my tent was proof enough.

I turned my head to the sound of a building creaking in the distance, a chunk of concrete falling into a nearby, but thankfully cleared out, market square. I saw a flash of white and stopped in my tracks, my heart leaping into my throat.

I’d seen her around the camp many times. She’d been in my tent, stepping out of the shadows and running her fingertips over my skin. But she was just a ghost, disappearing every time I got near.

I turned away from her, stuffing my hands deeper into my pockets as I picked up my pace. I knew Lena would haunt me for the rest of my life. I knew I would see her every time I looked up at the stars. I knew, during one of those lucky, infrequent nights, that I would see her again, but only in my dreams.

“Xander!”

“Not now,” I breathed, closing my eyes against her voice. My head was throbbing from the hangover I was nursing. I had no time for ghosts. I licked my lower lip as I neared the fence. I could already taste the liquor, and could already feel myself going numb. One drink would be enough to wash the sound of her voice from my mind.

“Xander, slow down—”

A hand wrapped around my upper arm and I whirled around, grabbing its owner by the shoulders and shaking them.

“Don’t f*****g touch—”

“X-Xander?” Lena whispered, taking a step away from me and hugging herself with her arms. She was wearing a white, sleeveless top, and I could see the red marks I’d left on her skin. She looked real. She’d felt real—

“Oh—” It was all I managed to say before I reached out and clutched her to my chest. I fought for breath, the air coming out of my lungs in choked sobs as she wrapped her arms around me and squeezed. Between us the swell of her stomach pushed against the button of my jeans, the metal pressing into my skin.

She was here. They were both here.

“I’m sorry,” she sobbed, her tears soaking through my shirt. She had nothing to apologize for. She didn’t owe me anything, whereas I owed her the world, and then some.

I felt suddenly idiotic as I ran my fingers through her hair, continuing to clutch her to my chest. I’d spent the last two weeks pining, wallowing away in an indescribable grief only to numb myself with alcohol to try to take the edge off.

What had she been doing in the meantime? What had she done, or sacrificed, to be back here, with me?

I thought of Rowan, the way his eyes betrayed his calm, calculated reserve during the week before he left for Valoria to assess the situation with the refugees there. He’d been shattered by her loss.

“Your parents aren’t here,” I said against her hair, taking the first deep breath I’d taken in weeks. She had her arms wrapped around my waist with no hint of letting go anytime soon. “But your uncle is, and your aunt Kacidra has been assisting with surgeries—”

“Just give me a minute,” she breathed calmly.

I felt her eyelashes flutter against my shirt as she sighed, her sobs ceasing. When she finally looked up at me, I noticed something strange, and I reared back a little to get a better view of her eyes. The usually unearthly pale silver of her irises, normally flaked with blue like her father’s, were different, bluer in hue than they had been before. Her hair as well wasn’t the starch white I was accustomed to. It looked more golden in the sunlight, still pale but definitely more blonde, almost like it had been when I started to see her around campus.

“What happened?” I asked, running my thumb across her cheek as I wiped away her tears.

“I gave something up,” she whispered, “so I could come home.”

“What did you give up?” I asked slowly, anxiety creeping up my spine. I laid a hand on the side of her belly, and the baby within gave a little kick in response to my touch.

“I gave my powers back to the Night God,” she said, matter-of-factly, like that revelation wouldn’t shake me to the core. “But—” she pulled away from me, yanking on a chain around her neck until a yellow gem slipped free of her shirt and settled in her hand. “When I’m ready, all I have to do is ask for them back.”

“Your powers—”

“I’m still a wolf, and still a White Queen,” she said with a soft smile, tucking the gem back into her shirt. “But clover won’t spring up between the floorboards when I’m upset, and I can’t create any more portals. Not unless I really want to.”

I let my breath out in a sigh, oddly relieved to hear it. I gathered her in my arms again for a moment.

“What were you doing all the way out here at the edge of the camp?”

I licked my lips, the taste of last night’s whiskey still clinging to my teeth despite brushing them several times.

“Nothing,” I murmured, turning her around with my arm draped around her shoulder. “Are you hungry?”

CHAPTER 627 : YOU’RE NOT COMING BACK

Lena

Xander set the food down on a makeshift desk in the corner of his tent. He broke a load of crusty, golden bread in half, handing one half to me as I lingered in the tent’s entrance, taking it all in.

He had his own tent as an Alpha. It was roughly the size of the cottage we’d stayed in during our time in Crimson Creek, and just as sparsely furnished. There was only a cot to sleep on, a desk made of crates and pallet board, and a stool, which I noticed was broken as if someone had manhandled it and then tried to put it back together.

I took a bite of the bread, which was freshly baked and still warm. I wasn’t particularly hungry, but Xander looked as though he hadn’t eaten in days. He tilted a bowl of soup into his mouth, drinking it down without bothering to use a spoon, and placed the empty bowl on the desk. He’d eaten the bread while I was looking around, and now he was just standing there, staring at me like I’d disappear again if he blinked.

“I swear I’m really here,” I said with a soft laugh. His eyes glimmered for a moment before he looked down at the ground, shaking his head.

I sat on the cot, shifting my weight. It was hard, and I wondered if sleeping on the floor would be more comfortable. I looked down at the floor, which was covered in dried mud and soot—maybe not.

But then something caught my eye, something shiny that was reflecting the evening sunlight coming through the tent flap. I peered down at it and froze, noting three empty whiskey bottles tucked beneath the cot.

I met Xander's gaze, noticing the dark circles beneath his eyes. He was no longer the young man who'd once been known as the King of Morhan University, no longer that guy wearing sweatpants and a black windbreaker who'd put himself between me and Slate that fateful, unassuming day, when the course of my life had changed forever.

His hair was longer now, the black curls nearly touching his shoulders. His muscles rippled beneath his shirt and were cut to a fine finish, his forearms snaking with veins as he leaned back and gripped the edge of the desk, watching me.

His jaw was covered in a scruffy but short beard, like he hadn't shaved in a while.

He looked... lived in, like he'd seen it all, and then some.

But his eyes were the same, still nearly black and flaked with amber.

Xander, my... my Xander, my mate.

And I knew that he was my mate. I knew without a doubt that we were fated. I felt that bond stronger than ever, a product of the spell that had given me my wolf powers early. It was always him, and would always be him.

"How are you?" he asked.

I blinked up at him, a ghost of a smile touching his lips. He knew it was a silly question, but what do you ask someone who'd practically risen from the dead?

"I'm fine," I replied, my smile weakening as I noticed the scars running up the lengths of his arms. I thought of the empty bottles of liquor beneath his bed and felt a crack form across my heart. I couldn't ask how he was, because I already knew.

He wasn't fine. It could be months, or even years, before he could honestly say he was fine again.

"Carly Maddox is alive." It was all I could think to say. Xander only nodded, turning away from me as he ran his fingers over a stack of papers on his desk.

"I know. Word was sent to her mother in Valoria. She's seeking asylum there—"

"Carly had a baby a few hours before I came—before I came back," I breathed, and he turned around, looking surprised. "Her... uhm, the father of her son—they are in love. The baby wasn't—"

"Wasn't the king's?"

"No," I said, and his eyes softened.

He ran his tongue over his bottom lip, sighing deeply as he leaned on the desk again, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Her father died in battle," he said, grief flashing behind his eyes.

He looked at my belly. I'd unknowingly placed my palms against it, the child within moving against my touch. I felt a sting of guilt ripple through my heart as I thought of Carly's father, then my own.

Carly's parents had waited for years for news of their daughter's whereabouts, dead or alive. Her father had been alive within days of her arrival back in our realm. They'd just missed each other, and now Carly had a son, their grandchild, a child who would never know his grandfather.

"Your dad sent dozens of search parties looking for you," Xander said in a whisper, his eyes downcast. "Troy was the one who put an end to it."

"I'll find Troy later. I'll—I'll get in contact with my parents somehow, tonight. I just need a minute—" I swallowed against the pain twisting my stomach into a knot. I imagined my father out in those hills outside of Crimson Creek, his face shadowed by desperation, fear, and an indescribable grief.

When I opened my mouth to speak again, the words didn't stop flowing. I told Xander everything—about the spellbook, how I'd been given my powers to shift early, how Maeve and I had come to Breles, how Oliver and I had come looking for him. I told him about the Night God and the temple, what I'd seen within that altar and how I'd come back.

The sun was setting by the time I'd finished. Xander was still on the other side of the tent, and I was drowning in the distance between us. It had been weeks since we'd had a moment alone together, months since we'd had any peace. I missed him. I missed him desperately, and he was standing barely five feet away.

A horn sounded in the distance, and Xander slowly turned his head to the tent flap.

"That's curfew for the warriors who aren't on patrols tonight," he said, more to himself than to me. "I... Lena, I have to leave in the morning. I'm going back to Egoren."

"I—" Whatever I planned to say next fizzled out on the tip of my tongue.

Xander uncrossed his arms and straightened to his full height.

"I'm not leaving you behind. I'll come back for you. I promised I'd be back before our baby is born, and I mean to keep that promise."

"I know," I whispered, but the words felt hollow. We had made each other so many promises, and had come so close to never having the opportunity to stay true to them, countless times.

"I need to speak to Adrian," he said, taking a few steps toward me before he halted, heaving a chest-rattling breath. I saw pain flicker across his eyes, physical pain. My eyes once again raked over his scars, which were still reddened and barely healed. He was hurting; I could see it in his eyes. "I'll be back soon, okay? I'll grab some more food—"

"I'm fine, really," I said quickly, giving him a weak smile as I sat on the edge of the cot.

Alma had fed me until I felt like I would burst, and she'd sent me and Gideon to Breles with a basket of food I could barely finish by the time we reached what was left of the once great city.

The highway was barely passable. We'd drive through Morhan instead, around the massive lake that separated the two cities. Morhan was deserted, and it was obvious that battles had taken place there as

well. The brick buildings I knew so well were empty, blackened shells and broken glass covered every street.

Xander gave me a once over, one hand gripping the tent flap as if he was reluctant to leave. I was tired, and lines of fatigue were evident on my face, I knew that much.

“I’ll tell Troy you’re here and resting,” he said softly. “He can... I’ll tell him to find you in the morning.”

I felt a weight settle on my shoulder as I met his eyes. What had felt like only minutes to me had been two excruciating weeks for him, in the middle of a war zone, no less. The distance between us now was... I couldn’t explain it. Something was fractured.

He tilted his head toward the bottles beneath the cot, a flash of guilt shimmering behind his eyes.

“I’ve been having trouble sleeping,” he said.

I only nodded. I didn’t blame him, not a bit.

I woke to the sound of the tent flap falling back into place. A soft glow from a lantern touched my eyes, and I opened them to find Xander moving across the tent. He set something down on the desk, turning to me with his lantern in his hand as I struggled to sit up on the cot. My back screamed in protest, the thin bedroll that had been laid over the cot not nearly enough to make it comfortable.

“Go back to sleep—”

“I was awake,” I grumbled, rubbing sleep from my eyes. I heard Xander exhale, and the lantern light faded as he turned his back to me.

I noticed the duffle bag that was now on the floor. It hadn’t been there before, and I wondered if he’d been in and out of the tent during the evening while I was asleep. Clothes had been tossed inside without being folded, thrown haphazardly and spilling over the opening of the bag.

“What time is it?” I asked, stretching my arms over my head. My back popped, and I sighed as the feeling spread across my middle.

“Around one in the morning, I think,” he said in a hoarse whisper. He shuffled some paperwork around on the desk before turning back to me, leaving the lantern on the desk.

“Are you not going to sleep?”

“I don’t think there’s room for two,” he smiled, and that made, no matter how small and fleeting, warmth ripple through my chest.

“We’ve shared worse places to sleep,” I said softly, not daring to break eye contact.

He was still standing so far away from me, still out of reach. He was still looking at me like the second he touched me again, I would disappear.

"You're not wrong about that," he whispered. He sighed, running his fingers through his hair, then began walking toward the entrance of the tent. He looked outside for a moment before closing the flap entirely, buttoning it shut.

We had four hours until his ship to Egoren left the port. For whatever reason, I felt like four hours was all we would have together for a long time.

Maybe even forever.

"You're not coming back, are you?" I asked, but I felt as though I already knew the answer.

CHAPTER 628 : MARK ME... AGAIN

Lena

"I am coming back," he said, his voice a whisper.

I swallowed, nodding my head and looking down at the ground.

"Lena."

"Yeah?" I looked up at him, unable to stop the tears from welling in my eyes. One tear spilled over and trailed down my cheek.

Xander stepped toward me, then knelt before me. He reached up and used his thumb to wipe the tear from my cheek. "This isn't forever. I'll come back for you."

"We've said that to each other so many times—"

"And this is the last time, I promise." He took my hands in his, knitting his fingers around mine. "I promise."

"What—"

"I don't know what we're going to do, or where we're going to live. But I need to return to Egoren to find that out. It's going to be okay. We made it through this. We can make it through anything."

He rose on his knees and wrapped his arms around me. I knew it hurt him to do so; I could feel the way his muscles strained and then trembled around me.

"Xander," I said into his shoulder. I could feel the welts beneath his shirt as I ran my hands down his back. "You're hurting—"

"I'm fine," he replied, one of his hands running up the length of my back and into my hair, which was tousled from sleep. He pulled my head back so I was looking into his eyes. They darkened, a flash of need passing behind them that set a fire burning through my stomach.

He kissed me gently at first, his lips brushing against mine.

"I can give you my blood," I whispered against his lips.

“I need a lot more of you than that,” he growled, and I felt my body go limp in his arms. His tongue parted my lips, tangling with mine as his grip on my body strengthened. He pulled me into him, almost pulling me off of the cot in the process.

Primal desire took over. I couldn’t remember the last time we were truly alone together. He had me out of my clothes before I could blink, and then he rose to his full height to shed his own.

But my breath caught painfully in my throat as my eye focused on a jagged scar that stretched across his shoulder.

His mark was... gone.

“Xander,” I cried, reaching up to touch the barely healed wound, but he grabbed my wrist, stopping me.

“It doesn’t matter—”

“It matters!” I felt the tears rolling down my cheeks again. Oh, Goddess... my heart was shattering in my chest as I took in the scars that roped around his chest, his arms, and his neck. He’d been ripped apart. My hands trembled as I laid them against his belly where the muscles were taut but marred by healed bite marks.

He’d heal; I knew that much. But these scars would be there forever, a constant reminder of what had happened to both of us.

“You can mark me again,” he breathed as I trailed my fingertips over his skin. “I want you to. I need you to do that for me, Lena.”

“I don’t want to hurt you again, not after what—what they did to you—”

“You can’t hurt me,” he said, dropping to his knees.

“Xander, I can’t, not when you’re still healing—”

He kissed me again, hard, his lips bruising my own as he gathered my hair in his hand at the nape of my neck and pulled so I was looking up at him.

“You’re my mate,” he rasped. “I want your mark on my body.”

Desire ripped through me, clouding my judgment. I didn’t want to cause him any more pain. But...

He pushed me back against the cot, which groaned beneath our weight. It wasn’t meant for two people, but Xander didn’t seem to care that it was likely splintering beneath us. He ran his hands down the curve of my hips and thighs, cupping my ass as he pulled me closer.

My body was burning with heat, and my core was begging to be touched. I rocked my hips against his, a barely audible plea escaping my lips in a moan.

He kissed me again and again, his lips traveling down my neck and across my collarbone, over the mark he’d left on my chest.

He nudged my legs apart and ran a finger through my slit, testing me. I was already drenched, and a raspy grunt of approval was all I heard before Xander ran his tongue over one of my n****s. I sucked in

my breath and arched my back, crying out as the sensation of his fingers and his mouth brought me so close to the edge that I almost went over.

“Not yet,” he whispered against my skin.

I moaned his name and bit my lower lip as he pulled away.

“Mark me,” he whispered against my cheek as he positioned himself between my legs.

I cried out as he entered me in one long, swift thrust. My mind was a blur of conflicting emotions, but my body was pleading for release and willing to do anything to achieve it.

He was holding himself off the cot with one hand while his other hand explored my body, teasing me in all the right places. He knitted that free hand in mine and pinned our hands above my head, dipping his head down to kiss my neck.

I tried to focus. I tried to keep my mind clear and let my body take control. But my heart was hammering so rapidly in my chest that I found it hard to take a breath.

He'd be gone again, and it was probably the longest time we'd spend apart.

I clutched his arm with my free hand, pulling him closer so more of his weight was sheltering me. More of him, I needed more of him. All of him.

“Lena,” he rasped, panting as he met my eye.

I slid over the edge into a mind-numbing climax that took my breath away, and I shuttered beneath him.

His thrust picked up speed, desperation lining his face as he closed his eyes and moaned low in his throat. “f**k,” he growled between his teeth, pressing his forehead against mine.

I moved my head to the side, resting my chin against his shoulder as he came. A tear rolled down my cheek as I kissed his shoulder, my lips brushing against his skin, then my teeth.

I caught a glimpse of the mark I'd left on Xander's shoulder before he pulled a sweater over his head. Moonlight drifted through the small holes in the roof of the tent, illuminating the red half-moon mark that looked nearly identical to the first mark I'd left on him.

“I might be the first man to have been marked twice by the same woman,” he said lightly as he sat down on the cot, smiling softly at me. I matched his smile as I gathered a thin, worn-out blanket to my chest. “Here I—I have a shirt you can wear.”

He bent down and grabbed a long-sleeve shirt from his duffle bag, one he'd packed away for his journey. I didn't object. It smelled like him, and that itself was a small comfort. I could hear the sound of warriors waking up all around us even though the sky was still dark. Xander checked his watch, and sighed, his eyes settling on mine.

“I have to go soon,” he whispered, the words cutting through me like a knife.

"I know," I replied, swallowing against the lump in my throat. My cheeks were already stained with tears, but I refused to cry again, not now. I could be a blubbing mess later, maybe even in the comfort of my own bed in Mirage.

I wouldn't waste my final moments with Xander, at least for a long while, feeling sorry for myself.

He crawled over to me and gathered me to his chest. He laid us down, my body pressed into his as he drew slow circles over the side of the swell of my belly. He'd already promised me he'd be back in time for her birth. I was holding him to that promise. That was something I couldn't do on my own.

"Go to sleep," he whispered.

I chuckled at the demand, but my eyelashes fluttered against his shirt nonetheless. Fatigue was creeping up my legs as I settled against him.

"I want to see you off and say goodbye," I protested, the words a mere whisper.

"We're not going to say goodbye. I'm sick of goodbyes."

"Me too," I answered honestly, fighting to keep my eyes open. I looked up at him, taking in every curve of his face, counting every amber flake in his obsidian irises.

"No goodbyes," he repeated as his fingers continued their slow dance over my belly.

"I love you," I breathed as my eyes shut.

"I love you, too," he replied, kissing the top of my head. He pressed his cheek against the top of my head, and his warmth and heartbeat began to lull me into a deep sleep.

"I'm going to rule in Egoren with you," I whispered, but I wasn't sure if the words were even audible. "I'll go home with you when the time is right. Alexis will grow up there...."

I fell asleep snuggled against him. Even in my dreams, I could feel him there, his arms wrapped around me, one hand resting where our baby slept nestled in my belly.

I didn't feel him go. I didn't know that he'd lingered in the entrance of the tent for a good five minutes just looking at me, his duffle bag slung over his shoulder and his hands clenched into fists. I hadn't known how badly he wanted to stay, or how much he was willing to sacrifice for just an extra hour together, or an extra minute.

I hadn't realized it started raining as he left the tent and walked to the port. He'd lifted his face to the rain, letting the chilled bite of the droplets wake him up. He'd boarded that ship filled with regret.

I hadn't known that Abigail had approached him, her eyes glimmering with emotion as she asked him how I was. She'd wanted to come see me, but Adrian had told her to give me some space to be with my mate. She knew she'd see me again; she told Xander as much. But Xander put an arm around her shoulder and pulled her into a tight hug regardless. They'd both thought they'd lost me.

The ship pulled away from the port and drifted into the sunrise, all while I was lost in my dreams.

I slept soundly knowing that this was the last goodbye we'd have to experience.

And when I woke?

I was going home.

Chapter 629 : Going Home

Lena

He was right about not saying goodbye.

I hadn't even felt him go, and I woke around noon to the sound of rain pattering against the top of the tent. Beads of water ran across the ceiling, funneling in the center and rolling down one of the center posts holding the ceiling up, the water pooling on the ground.

The cot felt too large for one person all of the sudden, the edges cold to the touch.

He'd be somewhere near the Isles by now.

I forced myself to stand up and dress, to splash cold water on my face and braid back my hair. I wanted to do nothing more than curl back up on the cot and cry, but my tears were useless. He would keep his word; he always did.

My jaw was sore from the bite I'd planted on his chest. It could've just been a trick of my mind, but I could've sworn I could still taste his blood on my tongue.

My mate would come back. He'd come back, and we'd have our child. Then, I would follow him home to Egoren and be his Luna.

Winter Forest and the White Queen title be damned.

I walked out of the tent without a backward glance. I knew I wouldn't return, I had no reason to. Uncle Troy was likely wondering where the hell I was, and I was sure I would be on the next ship to Avondale, or even the port of Valoria. He'd likely already sent word to my parents that I was alive. They were expecting me, and no matter how badly my heart ached, I had to set my feelings aside and be the ruler, the princess my people expected me to be.

At least for a little while.

I was wearing a long-sleeved shirt Xander had left behind, the sleeves rolled up to my elbows and tucked in the pants I'd been wearing since the day Oliver and I suited up to storm the vampire realm. That felt like ages ago, but the memories of it were still fresh in my mind as I wandered through the maze-like war camp, which was still teeming with warriors from practically every territory in our realm.

A few warriors stopped to gawk at me as I passed, my white hair already spilling from the rushed braid hanging over my shoulder. I didn't stop, didn't make eye contact with anyone.

Xander had told me precisely where Troy's tent would be. I went straight there even though my stomach had begun to ache with hunger, especially after passing the dining tent where the smell of cornbread and roast chicken hung heavy in the air.

I could eat later. I could eat my fill once I knew what the plan would be. I'd get a good night's rest on whatever boat or plane I would be boarding.

But not now.

I flung back the tent flap to Troy's tent and stepped inside with an invitation, and laid eyes on...

"Robbie?" I croaked, surprised to see the giant of a man propped on a stool with his ankle balanced on his knee.

He crossed his arms over his broad chest, his auburn hair trembling as his brows raised and a deep chuckle emanated from his chest.

"Your mom and dad," he said with a breathy sigh, "are about ready to cause another war over you right now, Ms. Lena."

I rolled my eyes, wiping away the raindrops clinging to my shirt as I stepped fully into the tent.

"Where's Troy?"

"You just missed 'im, but he'll be back in a moment. Looking for coffee, I suspect."

I sat on the edge of the cot facing Robbie, looking him up and down. He looked like hell, bruised with bloodied knuckles and sporting a black eye.

I motioned to my own face, and he chuckled, shaking his head as he relaxed his long legs and stretched them out in front of them.

"Not from the war. Just a bit of spat with one of the other Alphas is all."

"You got into a fist fight with an Alpha?" I choked, taken aback.

Robbie shrugged, flexing his bloodied hand. Robbie was the Alpha of New Dianny, his mate, Alison, a survivor from the old pack who was able to flee the territory before Tasia brought the valley the ancient settlement of Dianny had been nestled between down over the top of the city. Their eldest daughter Joy was only a few months older than myself, and had married George the same day she turned twenty one.

Robbie had grown up just like Troy had, an orphan and a pirate by the time he could walk.

"Who?" I pried, but Troy walked into the tent just as the word left my mouth, and Robbie and I both fell into silence.

Troy sighed heavily, looking me up and down.

"You ready?" he asked, tilting his head towards the tent flap.

"For what?"

"To go home, Lena," Troy said, exhaustion flashing behind his eyes. He motioned toward a radio sitting on an unassuming table in the corner of the tent. "Your parents kept me up all night radioing every twenty minutes asking if you were on a ship yet."

"I'm not a child—"

"I told them that," he breathed, glancing at Robbie, who went pink in the cheeks and blew out his breath. "Your dad wasn't too happy about it, either."

I huffed out a breath, shrugging in surrender. "I had to... I needed a moment alone with my mate," I said forcefully, meeting Troy's eye.

He nodded in understanding, a ghost of a smile touching the corner of his mouth. "I understand. And that's why I told them to get off your back. You're alive and well; that's all that matters. But, come on, there's a supply ship heading back to the isles that's leaving in half an hour. You can take a flight to Mirage from Avondale tonight."

I chewed on the inside of my cheek as I bobbed my head at Robbie in farewell and followed Uncle Troy through the tent and back out into the camp. He was walking briskly, his deep brown curls trembling as he nodded his head in greeting to everyone we passed, regardless of rank.

Troy was a fantastic Alpha. I noticed how the warriors looked at him, damn near marveling at him. I also knew that Troy had been battling on the front lines beside those same warriors for weeks now.

"Why did Robbie get in a fight with another Alpha?" I asked as we continued our journey through the sprawling camp.

"Because some of the Alphas are already vying for this territory, and saying whatever they needed to say to stake their claim," he replied, grabbing two bottles of water out of a crate as we passed and tossed one back to me.

I wasn't ready for it and had to stop walking to bend down and grab it. I caught up to him, my breath catching in my throat as rain pelted my cheeks and the top of my head.

"But the Alphas of Breles and Morhan—"

"Both dead," he said, matter-of-factly. "The Alpha of Morhan has two sons, neither of which is older than thirteen. The Luna of Morhan will rule until her oldest son comes of age to take over the title. The Alpha of Breles left behind no heirs, just like his predecessor. The High Elder Council helped appoint the most recent Alpha of Breles to the position, but there are some packs who want this done the... old fashion way."

"And what is that?"

"By force," he said casually as we rounded a corner and headed down another endless line of tents. I could see the port in the distance, several large naval ships docked and glistening with rain. I thought of Charlie all of the sudden and almost stopped in my tracks.

"Charlie—"

"He's fine, a little banged up, but I don't think anyone made it out of this completely unscathed," Troy interrupted, turning his head to give me a smile. "He found his mate, last I heard. He's been helping clear the rubble—"

"Charlie found his mate?" I exclaimed, and this time I did stop walking.

Troy turned on his heel to face me, a wide smile spreading across his face. "He did. I couldn't be happier for him. Her name is Jasmine, and she fought alongside your aunt Maeve during one of the last battles. That's how they met, actually. Maeve was leading her forces back to the camp and Charlie came up to her to assist with the wounded. Maeve said the bond clicked into place the moment they laid eyes on each other."

The crushing weight against my heart lifted a bit, and I found it easier to breathe as Troy waited for me to start walking again. Charlie found his mate, and she was a warrior? I guess there was a silver lining to this war, at least for him.

"She's from Mirage, actually, part of one of the newer, smaller packs in the eastern edge of Valoria."

"That's just... that's wonderful," I said softly, still in disbelief. "How does it feel having two sons who have found their mates?"

"Ask me when Oliver finds his mate," Troy said soberly, a shadow crossing behind his eyes. I wondered if he knew what Oliver had sacrificed to save our kind and our realm. I found it unlikely he did, and that Oliver would ever tell anyone about it. The only reason I knew was because the Night God had shown me.

Oliver had lost his mate. And I'd lost a friend, if his mate was truly Elaine.

"Did everyone from Morhan evacuate to Mirage?" I asked as we neared the port. We'd been walking for a few minutes in heavy silence.

Troy nodded, motioning for me to take a left toward the port. "Those who didn't fight," he replied. "Are you looking for someone?"

"Two people," I said, although that number was much larger than two. I thought of all the friends I'd made on campus over the years and all the professors I'd admired. I wondered how many stayed to defend their city, and how many had perished doing so. "My roommates."

"Ah, those two women you invited to the wedding?" he said, glancing over at me. "I know for a fact that Vivienne fought with the forces from Breles." He paused, frowning his brow. "But she was injured and sent north for treatment. Heather, right—that was your other friend's name?"

"You have a good memory," I murmured, my heart squeezing around the thought of Vivienne being injured.

"I have an excellent memory," Troy corrected, giving me a teasing smile. "Heather didn't fight on the front lines, but she did work as a healer for several weeks. Last I heard she was relocated to one of the camps that sit along the northern border. That area saw a lot of violence, Lena. I'll reach out to Kacidra to check—"

"I'm sure Heather is fine, but yeah. I'd love to at least know where she is and how to get in contact with her. With both of them," I said, and meant it. Heather wasn't one to go down without a fight. I had no doubt in my mind that she was still alive.

We stopped walking as we reached the port. Warriors hustled about carrying crates of fresh supplies into the camp. One of the ships was flying the flag of Poldesse.

“You made it,” Troy said as he exhaled.

“I made it,” I breathed. I looked over my shoulder at the camp. Over the tops of the tents, I could see what remained of Breles against the horizon.

It was just... gone. But we’d won.

Now the real work began.

Chapter 630 : He’s Back

Lena

Two Months Later

Mom turned a letter over in her hands, peering down at the return address with a skeptical eye. I looked up from the pile of letters scattered in front of me on the long table in the library at the Castle of Drogomor, situated on the outskirts of Mirage.

“Who is that one from?” I asked, extending a hand.

She wordlessly handed me the letter, but I didn’t recognize the name.

“Who is Warren?” I asked before ripping it open. I unfurled the paper and then set it down on the table.

Mom arched her brow at me. “What?”

“This isn’t for us,” I said, sliding the letter to the side. “It’s for Grandpa, I think.”

“Well, what does it say?”

“He’ll kill us if we read his mail!”

“Your grandfather doesn’t live here,” she said with a little laugh, snatching up the letter before I could stop her. We’d been blocking out at least two hours a day reading through the letters that had been arriving at the castle recently. Most of it was for Dad, but the Alpha King of Valoria had been in Breles for the last two weeks trying to get the radio towers and landline system working again. We were picking up his slack, as a good Luna and princess would do, of course.

“Why would anyone send mail meant for Grandpa here?” I prodded, but Mom’s brow began to furrow as she quickly read through the letter’s contents, then abruptly rose from her seat. “What?” I said quickly, adrenaline prickling my fingertips. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” she murmured, but she looked entirely confused as her gaze flicked to the top of the letter and she started reading it over again. “This is from—”

I snatched the letter out of her hands and darted toward the window, where pale morning sunlight was filtering through the stained glass. Rainbows of light danced across the muted pink cotton dress I was wearing.

“Dear Elder Gray,” I began, reading it aloud. “I’m responding to an inquiry regarding an open position on the High Elder Council in the Realm of Light. My Alpha King has chosen me for the position, and I’m

writing with my intentions to accept the position to serve on your council. I'm under the impression Soren Black was originally the one called to serve, but he has graciously declined—"

Mom exhaled audibly as she dropped into one of the armchairs by the dormant hearth. It was summer, and there was no need for a fire. I could already feel the heat that was threatening to embrace Mirage, and it was only morning. I glanced at her, trying to read her expression before I continued.

"I am the brother and ally of Theo of Egoren and his mate Ciana."

The rest of the letter was just... business. The man asked about lodgings and accommodations for his family, where he would live. What this role would entail.

"Sincerely," I said, my chest tightening with excitement, "Warren Crimson"

I clutched the letter to my chest and turned to fully face the window. The Castle of Drogomor was miles and miles away from the Port of Valoria, but I gazed out that window as though I could see the port from where I stood.

"This letter is from Egoren," I breathed, mostly to myself. Mom was squeezing the bridge of her nose. "That means—"

Xander. He was back, he had to be! Why would mail arrive from Egoren if people from that realm hadn't been the ones to bring it through the portal in the first place?

"Lena—"

I was already moving toward the door to the library, my bare feet tapping on the stone floor.

"Lena!"

I spun around to face Mom, who let out her breath, nostrils flaring.

"What?"

"We don't know if Xander accompanied this letter to the port. This could have been sent from anywhere, and we have no way of confirming its authenticity."

I quickly walked over to her and dropped the letter in her lap, waving a hand in annoyance.

"This sounds like Dad's problem!"

"Lena!"

"What!" I was trembling with excitement. Xander could be at the port right now. I had to find him, or at least a way to contact him if he was in Avondale, or even Breles. He'd be coming this way; I knew that much.

"You are not going to the port today!"

"It's only three hours away by train!" I protested. "I'll be home before dinner!"

"You're pregnant—"

"Oh, am I going to give birth on the train? Mom, I'm only seven months along—"

“Closer to eight based on your last scan,” she said, clicking her tongue.

I frowned, tapping my toes on the floor as I chewed my lower lip.

“I won’t go into labor on the train—”

“That’s up to Alexis, not you, darling,” she said with a little grin. She was frustrated with me, but she couldn’t hide the glimmer in her eyes at the mention of Alexis, her soon to be granddaughter. We’d taken to calling her by her name instead of just “Baby” over the past couple of weeks. I’d been on multiple shopping trips to Mirage to buy baby clothes and fluffy stuffed animals, most of which seemed excessive, but I couldn’t stop myself.

Something had clicked inside of me, and having a baby suddenly felt real. I was going to be a mother, which had always been my absolute dream, but had never felt like it would ever be my reality.

But Xander hadn’t been here for it. He’d missed my anatomy scan, where Mom and I got to see every little finger and every little toe. Being home was peaceful and easy, but my heart had never been heavier.

Across the sea, Breles was still in shambles. Crimson Creek was the new home of the lower vampires who had escaped the realm of night before Oliver sealed the portal forever. Warriors from every pack still lingered in the west, and the High Elder Council was hard at work alongside the Alphas of our realm as they tried to piece together the fractured communities in the west who were stuck in places like Mirage, Avondale, and Winter Forest, unable to return home.

Most of my days had been spent in Mirage as of late. There was plenty of space for the refugees of Breles to go in the sprawling metropolis where more than a dozen territories bled into one massive city. Drogomor, my own pack, had taken many of the refugees from Breles into what was simply called “Old Town,” a medieval-looking area with stone buildings and cobblestone streets dusted with magnolia petals. As the princess, I’d taken it upon myself to see that everyone in Old Town was settled and happy.

But the wounds of the war ran deep. Hospitals were still full. So many families had been left without one or both parents. An orphanage had been set up in Old Town to house the children who had nowhere else to go.

That’s where I spent the most time. I was great with children, especially after my brief stint as a teacher in Cedar Hollow. I found myself leaning into the role again as the weeks passed.

I needed something to do, after all. I needed something to take my mind off my mate and what we’d been through, and what our future would look like.

“I won’t be gone for long,” I said softly, giving my mom a look that said I was not taking no for an answer. “I just... I’ll go to the post office and see if they can tell me where this letter came from and when exactly it was delivered.”

Mom surrendered with a sigh and a nod of her head, and I was off in a flash through the library doors.

The woman tending the counter at the post office looked down at the envelope the letter from Warren had been in, her brow knitted in a frown.

“I’ve never heard of... Egoren. Where is that?”

How was I supposed to explain?

“To the south—”

“Well, if it came from the south, I assume it came two days ago, maybe three. The amount of mail coming to Mirage right now is insane, if I’m being honest. It’s taking us a while to sort through it.”

“It’s alright,” I said softly, hiding the hurt threatening to make itself known in my voice. Two or three days? I turned to go, clutching the empty envelope in my fist as I walked out of the post office and onto the street.

It was bright and stifflingly hot. I shielded my eyes from the sun as heat prickled across my shoulders and arms, which were bare save for the thick straps that held my dress up. I’d have a sunburn just from the walk back to the castle at this rate.

Xander wasn’t here. If he’d been on the ship the letter came on, he would’ve arrived at the castle before the letter had. I bit my lip to stop it from trembling.

I hadn’t heard from him since the morning he left for Egoren. He’d sent an embrace down the bond between us in the later afternoon on the day he left, but it was wordless and distant. He’d likely crossed the portal shortly after that, and that had been eight weeks ago.

I heaved a breath, my throat tightening around a sob. I was being ridiculous, but I was incredibly disappointed. I shouldn’t have let myself get excited.

A woman across the cobblestone street was calling out to the people passing by. Her lemonade stand was glistening in the sun, the glass container holding the pale yellow lemonade was frosted and sweating from the ice slowly melting inside.

My mouth was dry, and I was hot as hell.

I glanced at the trail leading back to the castle and then turned to the lemonade stand. I had plenty of time for a lemonade; maybe I’d even bring one back for Mom.

I dug around for the loose change I’d been carrying around in my purse and handed them to the woman, who handed me two frosted glasses of lemonade in return.

I walked over to a shaded bench and sat down with a sigh, then sipped the lemonade, holding it in my cheeks for a moment before swallowing. It was perfectly tart, and I smiled at the flavor. I loved lemonade. I could drink lemonade all day. Alexis kicked me hard, and I smiled a little wider.

“You like it too, huh?” I said to her.

“When she’s old enough, I’ll build her her own lemonade stand.”

I froze, the glass resting on my bottom lip. For a moment I was sure that familiar voice had only been in my head, but as I turned and squinted into the sun....

Xander caught the glass before I dropped it, his eyes shimmering with pleasure.

“Hey,” he smiled.

I threw my arms around him and squeezed.