

Kings Breeder 631

CHAPTER 631 : THE AMBASSADOR

Lena

Xander planted a rough, hungry kiss on my lips and any shyness or apprehension vanished in an instant.

"I missed you," he said into my neck as I continued to clutch him against me, my fingers curling into the fabric of his shirt.

"How long have you been in Mirage?" I asked when I finally pulled away to look up at him. He was clean-shaven and dressed in casual trousers and a button-down shirt, with a white undershirt beneath. He looked more like a random resident of Mirage than an Alpha King, but I was more than okay with that. I reached up involuntarily and ran my fingers through his black curls, which were brushed back away from his face. He'd gotten a haircut since the last time I saw him. He looked.... Well, he looked so much healthier, and happier, since we'd parted ways after the war.

"Only a few hours," he replied, leaning down to press a kiss to my forehead. "I'm on my way to meet with someone, actually--"

"Meet with someone?" I laughed, pushing away from him. "Was that someone not me?"

"Well, I had to meet with them first, and they're on my way to the castle," he smiled with a shrug. "I didn't expect to run into you, but I'm glad I did. I think you should go with me."

He took my hand and began to lead me away, drinking deeply from the lemonade I'd bought for Mom.

"Who is it?" I asked.

"The ambassador for the vampires who are settling in the east," he replied. I halted, an uneasy feeling settling in my stomach.

"What?"

He turned to face me again, and I could tell by the look in his eyes that he totally understood my hesitation.

"There are a lot of them," he began, "and some, especially the families with children, have expressed the desire to spread out. There were four kingdoms of lower vampires, and they don't all get along, as well as those who had been enslaved by the king for... centuries. There's just not enough room in Crimson Creek for all of them, and your dad is planning on relocating some of the families to Mirage."

"My dad? You saw him?"

"I did," he said, blowing out his breath. "He doesn't like me very much, but I told him I'd check in on the ambassador. The vampires will start arriving at the end of the summer, from what I've been told. Winter Forest has also offered to accept at least three dozen families..."

He continued to talk as we started walking again. How hadn't I known this was happening? Mom knew, surely. She had to have known.

It wasn't that I was unaccepting of the idea that vampires would be living close by. The lower vampires were a totally different type of people compared to the Death Walkers who had battled against the allied forces for weeks. They were... good, at least the ones I'd met and grown to love.

But something was nagging at me as we walked through Old Town.

We stopped in front of an unassuming stone cottage along a cobblestone road. It had white-washed window frames and baskets of flowers hanging near the doorframe. A bistro table and chairs sat outside, basking in the shade that was filtering through the shade of several magnolia trees.

But thick curtains were drawn behind the windows, to keep the light out.

My heart was in my throat when Xander knocked on the door. It opened a crack, and whoever was behind it paused for a moment before opening the door wide enough for us to see who was behind it.

My mouth popped open, and I closed it immediately, raising my eyebrows at the tall vampire male who stood in the doorway.

"Lincoln," I said, and he nodded at me, a ghost of a smile touching his lips.

I could hear Xander and Lincoln speaking in low tones around the corner. They were sitting in the snug kitchen at a breakfast table, and every once in a while I heard the sound of paper rustling.

Carly stretched her arms over her head then snuggled deeper into the floral couch were sitting on. I looked down at the baby she'd placed in my arms, his cheek resting against the curve of my stomach as he made little suckling motions with his mouth in his sleep. He was beautiful, fat and healthy with a healthy head of dark hair. Carly sighed as she looked down at him, a soft smile touching her lips.

"Caleb was my father's name," she smiled weakly, meeting my eyes. "My mom says he looks just like me when I was a baby."

Carly had recently been reunited with her mother, who was living with them in the cottage but was out running errands. I could see the sadness behind Carly's eyes when she mentioned her father, and my heart squeezed with regret. If we'd found her sooner....

"You want to know what happened, right?" she said, meeting my eye.

I nodded, unable to form a vocal reply. I adjusted little Caleb's weight in my arms and settled into a comfortable position on the couch. I had a feeling this was going to be a long story.

"Oliver said you were also a Morhan student," she began, a soft sigh leaving her lips. "So I assume you know why I was in Crimson Creek in the first place."

I nodded, wondering if she could read the conflicting emotions playing across my face.

"I was rooming with three other Morhan students in the village. We went out to the bar one night, and a man approached us, telling us about a party at one of the estates. They wanted to go, and I was too afraid to stay in our apartment alone at night—"

“Why?”

“Just that... well, strange things had been happening since I arrived. I felt like I was being watched. We were testing the soil in the village one day and had traveled out past the village to the hills, and found, uhm—”

“Blood root,” I said, and her eyes shot to mine as she nodded.

“Yes... but I didn’t know it then. I thought it was a moss of some kind, so during one of my breaks I went back to Morhan and tried to research it, but I couldn’t find anything about it in the texts available in the library. But I found one mention of something matching its description in the archives, but the book itself wasn’t available to check out from the library. I had to get approval from the administration.”

“I tried to check it out as well,” I added, “but it was gone. We found it with your things in Maxwell Radcliffe’s attic.”

Her eyes darkened at the mention of his name.

“Did you read the book?” she asked. I sighed and nodded, a look of understanding passing between us. “Useless, right? That’s why I began to ask questions. Our soil samples and the samples of blood root we’d sent back to Morhan for testing were lost, and when my partners and I asked about it, the university had no idea what we were talking about.”

Caleb let out a long, drawn-out sigh as he snuggled deeper into my chest. Carly smiled weakly at him, her eyes glistening for a moment as she continued, “My roommates went to that party. I went back to our apartment and gathered my books in my backpack to go study in the foyer of the hotel, which felt like a safer place than where we were staying. But when I stepped out onto the street I felt this... pull. I can’t explain it. I remember turning to hills and hearing... voices. It sounded like my parents, and then like my boyfriend back at Morhan, like they were calling out to me, growing more and more frantic.”

Tears welled in her eyes as she sucked in her breath. I could sense Lincoln staring at us, and I turned my head to look through the doorway to the sitting room and across the hall into the kitchen. Lincoln’s face was grave, but he turned back to Xander.

“I went out into the hills. And I... I don’t remember what happened. I remember getting disoriented, and then feeling like I couldn’t breathe. I used to get panic attacks, and I think that’s what happened. I passed out, and woke up... I woke up in the attic.” She paused before continuing, “I wasn’t the only person there. There were two others, two other women. One of the women was dragged away shortly after I woke up. I can still hear her—hear her screaming. She didn’t come back, but the other... she had more freedom.”

“What do you mean?”

“Maxwell liked her—a lot. She did whatever he wanted as long as she had access to the rest of the house. I think she was doing it to keep him from... he, uh... he was interested in me. He liked that I was afraid of him. I couldn’t help it. I didn’t understand what he was doing to the woman he kept at that

house but when I finally did, it was too late for me. The woman came back to the attic one morning with a bite mark on her shoulder. It was gruesome, worse than I’d ever seen. I knew Maxwell was biting her, feeding from her, but this was different. She got really sick, fast. Maxwell told me to heal her, but I

didn't know how. I asked him for bandages and he grabbed my arm and cut open my hand. He made her... he made her drink my blood. He was so angry when... when she didn't get better. I didn't understand what he was wanting from me. She started to get aggressive with me and Maxwell removed her from the attic, and I never saw her again. He brought another woman a day later. Her name was Jen, but she was different. She was... looking forward to whatever Maxwell was planning for her. She wanted it."

"Jen?" I breathed, shock coursing through my veins. I hadn't noticed Xander in the doorway until he shifted his weight, and the floorboards creaked beneath him. I looked over my shoulder to where he was standing next to Lincoln, who nodded at Carly to continue, pain lingering behind his eyes.

"I don't know what happened to her—"

"We do," Xander said flatly. "We can talk about that later."

Carly swallowed and nodded her head, tears trailing down her cheeks.

"Maxwell came to get me one night and took me out into the hills. He was angry. I thought he was letting me go, but we came to this old temple in the hills and I remember him pulling a red stone from his pocket and mumbling something before he tossed it towards the temple. I felt the ground tremble and suddenly I was... someone appeared, dressed in a black cloak. I couldn't see their face. Maxwell said I wasn't the one, but he had no more use for me. The cloaked person grabbed me in an instant and the world just went dark—" Carly began to cry.

I heard Lincoln whisper something to Xander as I rose from the couch and gently placed Caleb in Carly's arms. She calmed down almost immediately, hiccuping as she wrapped her arms around the sleeping baby.

"I live nearby," I whispered. "We can talk again some other time."

Carly looked up at me and nodded, but I could still see the fear in her eyes. She'd been through a nightmare.

But she was here. She was safe.

I walked out of the cottage with Xander. He took my hand as we walked back toward the trail leading to the castle. Neither of us spoke until we reached the sprawling front garden where everything was a rich green dampled with flowers in full bloom. He squeezed my hand as we neared the castle.

"That was terrible," I said, my voice cracking around the words.

"I know. She's safe now," he replied, but his voice wavered. "We all have scars from this war, some deeper than others."

I caught a flash of red in the garden and turned, my eyes going wide.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

CHAPTER 632 : A NEW WHITE QUEEN

Xander

Maeve walked toward us, a beaming smile stretching across her face. She was dressed casually in a pair of pale blue gym shorts and a T-shirt, her hair knotted in a large bun on the top of her head. Lena looked surprised to see her, which I found odd.

“I decided to stop here on my way to Winter Forest,” Maeve said as she pulled Lena into a hug. “I’ll be back before the baby is born; I promise. I’m catching a flight to Winter Forest after dinner tonight.”

“You’re leaving so soon?” Lena was disappointed, I could tell. I’d just arrived, so I had no idea who was currently staying in the castle. Lena’s surprised expression told me Maeve had just arrived, and likely while we were talking with Carly and Lincoln.

“I have a few things I need to discuss with your grandma. Plus, Troy is meeting me there. I finally convinced him to leave Breles for a few weeks and take a break.”

“Has he not been back to Avondale?” I asked, and Maeve shook her head.

“No, not at all. Will has been standing in as Alpha for over two months now,” she replied.

An odd feeling settled in my stomach and I glanced at Lena for confirmation that something was up. I felt the change radiating off of Maeve already. She was... relaxed, peppier than I’d known her to be.

Troy’s behavior in Breles suddenly made sense. I’d seen him briefly when I arrived back in the Realm of Light. I spent a few nights in Breles searching for Oliver. I wasn’t going to make the trip to Crimson Creek, at least not yet. The only thing on my mind after crossing the portal into Lena’s world, was her.

Troy had been wholly focused on rebuilding Breles. We’d had a conversation about the most recent plans for who would claim the title of Alpha of Breles, and I was shocked to learn that Charlie’s mate was related to the late Alpha in some way, a distant niece. There was talk of Charlie becoming the Alpha of Breles, and his mate ruling as Luna.

Talk wasn’t a great word for it, actually. Troy was talking about it like it was already set in stone.

With Will ruling Avondale in his parent’s absence, and Charlie in Breles, Troy and Maeve were... free. But that didn’t feel right.

“Are you moving to Winter Forest?” I asked without meaning to say it out loud.

Maeve stared at me for a moment, her mouth twitching at the corners into what I thought might have been a smile.

“It’s hot as hell out here,” she said, wiping her brow.

The sun was beating down on us, and my own skin prickled with heat. Maeve and Lena were already turning a bright pink, and I nodded my ascent as Maeve turned Lena toward the castle.

But before we walked through the great, arched wooden doors, Maeve turned to look at me, a twinkle in her eye.

I felt my breath catch in my throat as an understanding passed between us, and months and months of pressure eased from my shoulders in a single second.

Hanna passed me a bowl of green beans as I passed a bowl of mashed potatoes to Maeve. It was an informal dinner, and we were serving ourselves, but that really meant I was the one passing every bowl and serving platter between the women as they chatted over glasses of sweet iced tea and plates of barbecued chicken.

Lena was picking her food, her eyes meeting mine every once in a while. She gave me a weak smile as she brought her tea to her lips, and I felt a prickle of heat run down the length of my spine. We'd spent the majority of the afternoon tucked away in Lena's bedroom, and we definitely hadn't been resting, but I felt a fresh wave of desire creeping through my body as her cheeks began to burn under my gaze.

I was hoping dinner wouldn't take long so I could go back upstairs with Lena. Two months had felt like an eternity, and we had a lot of catching up to do.

"I don't mind the walk. The airport's not that far," Maeve replied to Hanna's offer to have a car brought around to take Maeve to the airport. "My luggage is in Winter Forest already, I had it shipped three days ago."

"How long are you planning to stay?" Hanna asked with a hint of suspicion to her voice. She eyed Maeve, who was loudly stirring a spoonful of sugar into her iced tea.

"I already told Lena I'd be back before the baby is born, and stay until shortly after the birth," Maeve replied matter-of-factly, her chin lifting slightly as she peered over at Hanna. Something flashed between the two women, some silent, knowing conversations only the two of them could hear. Hanna's eyes narrowed, and she gave Maeve a look I didn't know Hanna was capable of giving anyone. I saw her for the Luna she was at the moment, as well as the legendary Dream Dancer who'd saved her realm from ruin two decades ago.

She was part of Lycaon's line, and I could feel it now.

"When are you going back to Avondale, Maeve?" Hanna asked in a lifted voice, her voice as sweet as candy.

Lena's eyes focused on her mother, her brow slightly furrowed. The air in the room shifted, and I felt tension descend on the table as Maeve pursed her lips and c****d her head to the side, obviously more than happy to drag this discomfort out as long as possible.

"I'm getting a little tired of feeling like I have sand sticking to my skin all day," she drawled, leaning back in her chair as she sipped her iced tea.

I could practically hear Lena's heart thundering her chest as she leaned forward, her eyes flicking between Hanna and Maeve.

Maeve waited several excruciatingly long seconds before she huffed out a breath and rolled her eyes, crossing her legs beneath the table.

"Troy and I are moving to Winter Forest. It's not a big deal."

Lena rose from the table, the dishes clattering as her belly knocked against it. I started to stand but Hanna motioned for me to stay seated, her face shadowed by confusion.

“What do you mean, you’re moving to Winter Forest?” Lena said sharply, her cheeks flushing of color. For a moment I couldn’t tell if it was relief or disappointment that flashed behind her eyes.

I continued to eat my dinner like nothing was happening.

“Will is the new Alpha of Poldesse. It’s been decided,” Maeve stated, her voice calm and steady. Hanna arched her brows, glancing at Lena. “And I’m going to... I’m going to step in when Mom is ready to step down,” Maeve continued, casually sucking on a piece of ice. “I’m the next White Queen, after all.”

Lena choked on a laugh, her eyes welling with tears. I took another chicken leg off the platter in front me, not even bothering to use the serving utensils that had been laid out. I bit into it as I glanced from woman to woman, trying to read the conflicting emotions crossing over the faces of my mate and her mother. Maeve, however, looked as though she had just been talking about something as trivial as the weather.

Lena’s shoulders fell a fraction of an inch, her face washed with disbelief. “Really?” she asked. Maeve nodded, shrugging a shoulder. “You’re going to be the next White Queen—”

“I thought you were abdicating the title?” Hanna gasped, shock etched into every line and curve of her face.

“Well, that was before that stupid book showed me my death, and before I spent weeks battling against the undead. I think maybe I was wrong in giving that up. I want a little more out of life.” She turned to look at Lena, a soft smile touching her mouth. “As long as you’re okay with it, honey. If you want the title, it’s yours. Otherwise....”

Otherwise, it would likely be decades until Lena needed to go to Winter Forest to rule.

Lena damn near pulled me out of my seat. I stumbled as she dragged me toward the doorway leading out of the dining room. I muttered a curse under my breath, as Lena’s nails bit into my skin. She was trembling with excitement, which was a relief.

“Uh, thanks. For dinner,” I mumbled over my shoulder to Hanna, who just nodded with a confused smile on her face before turning back to Maeve.

I heard Hanna’s muted exclamations as the door to the dining swung closed, and Lena and I were alone in the main corridor. She spun around and heaved a breath, her mouth curving into an almost delirious smile.

For the very first time in the entirety of our relationship, the future was open to us.

“W-what now?” she breathed, her voice laced with excitement.

I couldn’t do anything but shake my head and smile.

“Come on. I have something for you.” I extended my hand and she took it, letting me lead her back upstairs to her room.

I walked into the room behind her and immediately went to the old “Morhan Varisty Wrestling” duffle bag I’d been carrying around for months. That bag had seen some s**t, that was for sure. But it had kept my belongings safe and accounted for.

And, it had just carried a gift for Lena across two realms—a birthday gift.

I took the book from my bag and turned around with it in my arms, extending it toward her. She arched her brow as she took it from me, looking down at the cover with wide eyes.

“It’s an encyclopedia—”

“It’s about the plants of Egoren,” she whispered as she sat on the edge of her bed, which was still ruffled and undone from what we’d been up to earlier in the afternoon. She opened the book and began thumbing through the pages as I sat down next to her.

I had something else for her, but that could wait a moment.

“Happy Birthday,” I said, tilting my head to look down at a picture of a basic looking shrub of some kind that had caught Lena’s interest. She looked up at me, her eyes creased with pleasure. “I’m sorry I missed it.”

“It’s not a big deal. I already had my wolf powers, remember? Mom and I just went out for ice cream.”

“No party?”

She chuckled, shaking her head. “No party. Everyone was still over in Breles, you know—almost everyone.” She looked back down at the book, her eyes taking in every word on the page.

“I have something else—”

“If you think I’m the kind of girl who needs to be showered in gifts—”

I reached into the pocket of my pants and pulled out a velvet sack. She immediately recognized it, her eyes darkening as she looked up at me.

“Before you shot me into your garden realm and trapped me there,” I teased, watching her initial guilt fade into annoyance, “I was going to give you this.” I emptied the contents of the sack into the palm of my hand, the ring reflecting little blue spheres over my skin as it caught the light of the chandelier above my head.

“Xander—”

“I know it’s ugly,” I said with a little laugh, holding it by the band. “But it’s yours, regardless of whether you chose to marry me and be my Luna, or not.”

“What makes you think I wouldn’t—”

“Because I don’t want you to marry me because we’re having a child together, or because you think this is expected of you. I want you to have a life, Lena. I want you to use the degree you worked so hard for and live for something outside of the obligations passed down to you through the White Queens. And if—” I ran my knuckles over her jaw, looking deep into her eyes. “If you need time to just be you, to be Lena, not the Princess of Valoria or the Luna of Egoren, I would understand. I’d love you for it.”

“You made me a promise,” she replied in a whisper, knitting her hand in mine, the ring pressed between our palms, “that we’d be okay—that’d I’d be okay. I trusted you, even when I didn’t want to. You kept that promise, Xander. You never broke it.”

“I—”

“I love you,” she said, her voice trembling as leaned into me, her cheek resting against my chest. “I want to be your Luna. I’ll be—I’ll be your Luna. But I especially want to be your wife. I don’t think there’s anything I’ve been more sure about in my life.”

“So... That’s a yes?”

“You technically haven’t asked me anything yet,” she giggled, and for the first time in what felt like my entire life, my heart felt whole.

Chapter 633 : Something’s Wrong with Him!

Lena

“Will you be my wife?” Xander asked, his fingertips running down the length of my spine.

His touch sent a ripple of gooseflesh over my skin and I shivered, giving him a gentle smile.

“Aren’t you supposed to get down on one knee?” I teased, and his dark eyes narrowed on mine, glimmering with mischief.

He let out a long sigh and slid from the edge of the bed to his knees. He held up the ring, c*****g his eyebrows.

“Now ask me again—”

“Lena...” he growled, his cheeks coloring with what might have been a prickle of annoyance. Xander had been playing games with me since the day I met him. It was high time for a little payback.

“You’re not really selling it, Xander,” I quipped.

He exhaled through his nose, nostrils flaring. Clearing his throat, he blinked up at me, his face settling on a blank, void expression.

“Will you, Princess Selene Gray of Valoria, Daughter of Alpha King Rowan and Queen Hanna, granddaughter of Ethan Gray and White Queen Rosalie, Niece of—”

“Oh, for Goddess’s sake—” I snatched the ring out of his hand and it slid it on my own finger, giving him an incredulous look. The band was incredibly tight, and when I tried to force it over my knuckle, he reached out and stopped me.

“Your fingers are swollen,” he chuckled. “It’ll get stuck—”

“I’m huge,” I frowned, my shoulders slumping.

“You’re pregnant,” he corrected, his fingers tilting my chin up so I could look into his face as he rose to his full height. “And you’ve never been more beautiful. It’s just a ring, anyway. I honestly don’t plan on even wearing a wedding ring, and I don’t think you should either.”

“What? Why?”

“You’re constantly out in the dirt, Lena,” he laughed, sitting down next to me. “You snag your ring on a tree branch, or something, and rip your hand open—”

“Goddess, Xander! I doubt that’ll ever happen.”

He shrugged, laying down on the bed with his hands crossed over his chest.

Like so many times before, all that I wanted to ask was, “What now?”

Maybe he’d been reading my mind, because his eyes traveled from the canopy of my bed to meet my gaze, a sleepy, boyish smile touching his lips.

“Do you think your aunt was serious about being the next White Queen?”

“She’s serious,” I breathed, crawling towards him and laying down on my side. He ran his fingertips over the swell of my belly, his touch sending little bursts of electricity over my skin.

“Are you upset about it?”

“No,” I admitted, “I’m not upset, not in the slightest. Especially now that... after everything that happened, you know. I haven’t ever ruled over a pack before, not like my parents or my aunts and uncles have. I need more experience.”

“You need to live a little?”

“Yeah, I... I do.”

And now I had the chance. I had decades of life to live before I even needed to think about taking my Goddess-given throne. I nestled my cheek against his chest, closing my eyes against the soft circles he was tracing over my hip.

“Before I left Egoren,” he began, “I... I put some things in motion in the event I didn’t come back.”

“What do you mean?”

“My Uncle Theo is the interim Alpha until I make up my mind. He’s been seeing to things for the past... well, over a year now, while Adrian and I...” He tapered off, his chest raising and falling as he took a breath.

“While you were here looking for White Queen to kidnap and drag back to your realm?”

“I mean, you aren’t wrong.”

I smirked, nestling closer to him.

“Anyway, if I choose not to come back... there are options. But I’d have to return after the baby is born to—”

“Xander. I’m going back to Egoren with you.”

Xander’s body relaxed around mine for a moment, exhaling deeply.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes—” I looked up at him, giving him a soft smile. “But I think my family will want a wedding here, first, a big one, most likely.”

“Is that what you want?”

I pursed my lips, mulling it over. To my surprise, I kind of did want a big wedding. I wanted all of our friends there, our family... his family, too, if that was even possible.

“Yes, actually.”

“Then we’ll have a big wedding,” he said with conviction, then paused, looking down at me. “But no pink, okay? There was still pink glitter all over the palace in Avondale when I was there yesterday.”

I wanted nothing more than to roll over onto my belly to rest my chin on his chest while we talked, but the baby was in the way. “You were at the palace?”

“Just the foyer. Maeve wasn’t there, and now I know why. Will was out on business and Hollis was taking a nap, from what the butler told me. I was looking for Oliver.”

“I thought you said you traveled from Breles to Avondale with him?”

“I did, yeah. I stayed the night in his house downtown but in the morning he was gone. He barely said a word to me the night before. I’d left the ring in his safe; that’s why I was there. I left it there before Adrian, Oliver, and I went to the Findali after you were taken by King Nikolas.”

The mention of King Nikolas’s name made my skin crawl. I shivered involuntarily. Xander pressed me close to him, resting his chin on the top of my head. Maybe one day these memories wouldn’t feel so fresh or so painful, but for now....

“Is Oliver okay?”

“No,” he answered honestly.

“Are you okay?” I asked, my words laced with worry. He exhaled through his nose, his eyes fixed on the far wall.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

But there was a hitch to his voice, a lie woven between the words. I ran my tongue along my lower lip and decided prying wasn’t the best course of action. If Xander wanted to talk about what he’d been through during the war, especially when I’d been... when he thought I was dead. I’d listen, but I wouldn’t force him to talk unless I needed him to.

“We should probably tell your mom we’re engaged,” he whispered after a few moments of contemplative silence. I sighed, nodding. I sat up, stretching my aching legs out in front of me. I had another two months until this baby would be born, and that felt like an eternity.

“We can tell your dad in two days’ time.”

“What’s in two days?” I asked as I followed him out into the hallway.

“I have to go back to Breles, to Crimson Creek. I think you should come too.”

“Crimson Creek—”

“We need to check in on our friends,” he breathed, taking my hand as we walked toward the stairs.

“And I think that’s where Oliver went. I need to... I think we should both try to talk to him.”

What Xander really meant to say was that I needed to be the one to talk to Oliver. No one else in our realm understood what Oliver had done as much as I did.

I woke up with a jolt, moonlight flooding through my bedroom window. I’d heard something, but now I wasn’t so sure.

It was quiet in the room as I gathered the sheets up to my chest, looking around in the dark. I turned to Xander, who was asleep on his side, facing away from me.

I laid back down facing him, my knees curled against my stomach. I reached out to touch him, to lay my hand against his back but before my hand met with his skin, he let out a low, terrified moan.

“Xander?”

“No—No—”

I scooted toward him, wrapping my arms around him. He was trembling, his whole body shaking and damp with sweat.

“Xander,” I said against his back, squeezing him gently.

He heaved a breath, then thrashed, his elbow nearly striking me in the face as he flopped onto his back.

I scooted away from him, but not fast enough. He grabbed my arm, his fingers clamping down so tightly that I was sure he’d leave bruises. He was trying to bring me closer to him, his other hand coming up toward my neck.

“Xander!” I tried to pull myself away, but he was too strong.

His face was etched with fear and pain, his teeth bared in a grimace. But his eyes were still closed. He was asleep. He was dreaming.

“Don’t touch—me—”

His hand flew around my neck and I screamed. I kicked at him, my hands swinging wildly as I tried to smack him to wake him up.

He cried out like I was hurting him, his chest heaving like he was struggling to breathe.

“Wake up!” I cried, clawing at the hand that was starting to squeeze my neck. “Xander!”

The door to my bedroom swung open and in a flash of red, Maeve was launching herself on the bed. Xander began to fight her as she pinned his arms down, his mind still wrapped in whatever vivid nightmare he was having. He let go of my neck and I reared away, crawling back toward the end of the bed, my hands coming up to my neck. His nails had left divots in my skin, and tears were streaming down my face as I watched Maeve do everything in her power to wake him up.

She let him go long enough to pull her arm back and slap him with all of her strength, the sound of her palm meeting his cheek echoing through the room and the hallway beyond.

Xander cried out, then his body slackened. He was panting, his eyes watering painfully as he slowly brought his fingers to his face. Maeve flinched like he was about to strike her. She slowly climbed off of him, lingering by the side of the bed, her face twisted in concern. Xander sat up, his mouth ajar as he rubbed at his jaw. Blood pooled on his lips, and I noticed that he'd bitten his tongue... hard.

He looked confused as he glanced up at Maeve, then his eyes slowly met mine.

Recognition clicked in his mind when he saw me, saw the bruise on my arm and the way I continued to hold my neck. Tears were spilling from my eyes, my blood hammering in my ears so loudly I hadn't heard my mom and two warriors cross the threshold of my bedroom until they were already inside.

"I hurt you," he said to me. His tone of voice absolutely shattered my heart.

I mouthed his name, but he was off the bed in an instant, stumbling toward the door. He pushed past the warriors as Maeve turned on her heels and stalked after him, giving Mom a concerned look in passing.

Mom's arms came around me, her voice a soft lullaby in my ears.

"Are you alright?"

"No!" I cried, dissolving into tears. "What's wrong with him? Something's wrong!"

Chapter 634 : I Hurt Her

Maeve

I followed Xander through the darkened corridors and down the stairs, my bare feet barely making a sound. Xander was exceedingly tall, taller even than Troy. Even being the tallest out of all the women in my family, I was panting as I tried to keep up with his long stride.

He had no idea where he was going, but I could tell he was trying to get out of the castle. He was going to shift; I could feel it. He was going to run.

But I wasn't going to let him.

"Stop!" I hissed when he finally found the door to the back garden. He froze, his fingers wrapped around the doorknob for the space of a breath before he pushed the door open and stormed out onto the back terrace. I huffed a breath and tore after him, thankful for the cool breeze that fanned over the exposed skin beneath my shorts. "Damnit, Xander. I said stop!"

He whirled around, baring his teeth at me. I could see tears glimmering in his eyes, which were nearly black in the pale light spilling from the open door behind us.

"I hurt her," he spat, fury sharpening each word to a brutal edge.

"Yeah, you did. But I can tell you're hurting much more than she is right now," I said, trying to keep my voice level. I could see a bruise forming along his jaw where I'd slapped him with my fingers curled into my palm. Blood still coated his lips, and his eyes were wide with horror—horror, and raging, infectious guilt that damn near snapped my heart in two. "You're not the only one going through this," I coaxed, still standing my ground. If he so much as looked like his wolf was going to take over, I'd take him to the ground. I'd pin him to the Goddess-damned concrete and force him to listen to me.

He was panting as well, his hands clenched into fists. He was trembling, but not from the cool breeze.

"Whatever you saw," I said, taking a cautious step forward, "it's gone now. It's over."

"Yet it replays over, and over again," he growled, "on a constant f*****g loop!"

"You need to talk to someone about what happened to you—"

"I can't," he snapped, his eyes shimmering with tears. "I don't want to think about it ever again—"

"Xander—" My voice broke around his name, especially as he hung his head and brought his hands to his face. I'd seen that same look in Oliver and Charlie's eyes—pure, unadulterated grief. Terror. Fear, and confusion. Whenever I looked at my sons, I saw them as they'd been when they were young, their eyes shining with excitement and wonder. Xander had been a little boy once. He'd been loved, cherished. He likely had someone back home who was crushed at the thought of him facing the violence we'd just defeated.

Those boys... these children... my children—they'd never be the same again.

"You're going to be alright," I said through a sob. Xander didn't look at me, his eyes downcast on the concrete. "Everything is going to be alright."

"I could have killed her," he whispered.

I swallowed against the sob threatening to spill from my throat and nodded. "How often is this happening?"

"Every time I f*****g blink. I haven't slept in weeks."

I nodded again, chewing the inside of my lower lip as I took a few cautious steps towards him. I came up next to him to lean against the terrace. He was looking toward the forest, his eyes wide open but totally unseeing. He was still trapped inside his mind, likely replaying the nightmare, almost like he was punishing himself for it.

I didn't tell him that I was also having nightmares. I'd gotten to their bedroom so quickly because I was already awake, panting in my sweat-soaked sheets while trying to get my heartbeat to regulate. I heard Lena scream his name, and I knew exactly what was happening. I'd felt it in my blood as I raced toward their bedroom.

I wished with all of my heart that Troy was here right now. He would know what to say to him. Troy always knew what to say.

“Troy’s been having nightmares too. So has Charlie, and... and I assume Oliver is having them as well....” I couldn’t help the way my mouth pressed together and my eyes squeezed shut at the mention of Oliver. Tears spilled down my cheeks as I tried to hold in a sob. I felt Xander’s hand on my shoulder, then he pulled me into his chest, holding me there while I came apart at the seams.

“I saw Oliver briefly,” Xander whispered. “He was... he seemed like he was holding up alright.”

I knew that wasn’t true. I knew my son. I knew that what he’d done had shattered him completely, and I didn’t know how to make it better.

I pulled away from Xander, wiping my eyes as I turned back to the forest. I hadn’t cried in a long time; I hadn’t had a reason to. But I felt like I’d done nothing but cry for the past two or three months.

“Troy takes a blood root tincture every few days,” I said, hiccuping. “I tried it, but it did nothing for me.”

“Why is he taking blood root?” Xander sounded concerned, and when I met his eye, I noticed the flash of uncertainty darken his irises.

“Some of the vampires said it will help with the... symptoms, after being bitten—chills, fever, things like that. Troy said it was helping some of our warriors with nightmares.”

“But it did nothing for you?”

“No,” I replied, wrapping my arms around myself. “I wasn’t bitten. Not once.”

Xander grew quiet, his eyes fixed on the house. I could feel his guilt and inner turmoil from where I was standing a few paces away from him.

“Lena’s going to be alright—”

“I can’t sleep next to her—”

“She probably tried to wake you up. You had no idea you were doing that to her,” I coaxed, but he shook his head, his face covering in a shadow.

“I... I thought coming back here would make it better,” he admitted, running his hand over his face. “I thought some of this was just... being separated from my mate. I felt better today than I have in weeks, Maeve. But then the second I closed my eyes I just... it all came back.” He cleared his throat, running his fingers through his hair and ruffling it in frustration. “My people are suffering. The warriors that came home are just—just as bad as I’ve been. I spent the last two months sitting and talking with the families of those warriors who didn’t come back to Egoren. I had to explain why. I’ve never felt more inadequate—”

“Xander—”

“And I just hurt my mate. I was strangling her. I could’ve killed her.”

“You need to talk to her about this,” I pleaded. “Lena can help you—”

“This goes beyond the powers of the White Queens—”

“That’s not what I’m saying!”

“I can’t trust myself, Maeve. She’s having that baby soon, and then what am I supposed to do? What if I hurt her, our daughter?” His voice cracked and he shook his head, turning away from me.

What was I supposed to say to him now? I didn’t have the answers he needed. I wasn’t his mate. I didn’t know him like Lena knew him. I just knew he was a warrior. I’d seen the same c****e he’d seen. I saw my sons when I looked into his eyes, saw the same sadness and pain.

This war had ripped our world in half, and it would be years until we figured out how to pick up the pieces and heal.

“I have blood root,” I whispered. “You should try it.”

“I will.”

“You should talk to Lena—”

“We’re going to Crimson Creek tomorrow,” he interrupted, and I nodded.

Hanna wasn’t going to be happy that Lena was traveling while she was this far along, but neither of us would stop her. I’d see to that myself.

“Rowan is... he’s having a hard time, too. He blames himself for this.”

“Why would he blame himself?” Xander asked, vitriol lacing his words.

Rowan had had a lot to say to me and Troy about Xander, but I knew them both, and I didn’t understand the rift between the two men at all.

“He feels like he should’ve prepared Lena for something like this instead of sheltering her,” I said, then a realization dawned on me. “He feels like he... his daughter was in a terrible, dangerous position with a horrible man. What he wanted to do to her... It reminded him of the things Hanna would have faced if we hadn’t defeated Tasia—”

“I understand,” Xander said quickly, clenching his fists. “I do. I do understand that part of it.”

“Rowan doesn’t hate you.”

“He has a good reason to hate me, especially now.”

Xander walked away before I could utter another word. He walked into the castle, and as I breached the back foyer I saw his figure disappear around a corner on the floors above. I let out my breath, leaning on the doorframe. He was going back to Lena’s room, at least. They’d figure this out. If Troy and I, and Rowan and Hanna, had been able to figure things out....

“She’s shaken, but she’s fine. More concerned about him,” Hanna said from the shadows.

She looked frazzled as she approached. I wiped the rogue tears from my cheeks and motioned for her to come close, wrapping my best and dearest friend into a hug.

“Are you okay?” I asked, and she nodded through a shuddering breath.

Lena

Xander lingered in the doorway for a moment, his eyes downcast as he slowly entered the room and closed the door behind him. I was standing by the window, my arms crossed over my chest as I watched him take a few more steps towards me, raising his head to look at me.

“When you asked if I was okay,” he began, “I should have been honest with you.”

I walked across the room and took his hands in mine, stroking his palms with my thumbs. I looked up at him, noticing the pain behind his eyes.

I led him to the bed and crawled into it, motioning for him to follow. He was reluctant. I knew he was afraid of hurting me again, I could see it, but I reached out and took his hand, pulling him towards me.

I laid back against the pillows with Xander’s head pressed against my chest. I ran my fingers through his hair, listening to his breathing begin to slow.

“Tell me everything,” I breathed, wrapping my arms around him and holding him like a child. “Please, Xander. I need to know what you went through.”

An hour passed, then another. Pale morning sunlight began to filter through the curtains when Xander’s voice faded into soft, rhythmic breaths. He fell asleep against my chest, his arms wrapped around me, and I held him, running my fingertips over his back as silent tears rolled lazily down my cheeks and along my jaw.

He slept, and slept, and slept, until the morning sun was beaming full and bright over our bed.

Chapter 635 : Between the Dark and the Light

Lena

I ran my hand down Xander’s back, my thumb grazing over his spine. I could feel each vertebra clearly, and my heart sunk in my chest as I stepped closer to him, wrapping my arms around his waist.

“You need to eat more,” I coaxed, glancing up at him.

His eyes were on the water, however, and the port of Breles that was just visible on the horizon. His mouth twitched as he looked down at me, a look of understanding passing behind his eyes.

“Alma will make sure I’m fed, I assure you. She probably won’t let us leave until I’m back to my usual weight.”

I gave Xander a soft smile, and it was all I could muster. His nightmares the past week had lessened but weren’t gone entirely. Some nights he’d been able to sleep through the night without waking, but most of the time he tossed and turned, crying out in his sleep. I just laid there, being as still and quiet as possible so I didn’t startle him, and silently cried as he suffered.

At first, he'd refused to sleep in the same bed as me. We'd spent a few nights in Avondale looking for Oliver, but to no avail. Will hadn't seen or heard from him, and to my surprise, both he and Hollis were torn to shreds about it. Hollis and I even spent an evening just talking in one of the sitting rooms at the palace, talking like the friends we used to be.

Grief has a funny way of pulling people together, I guess.

We'd been on the ship to Breles for three days. We should have been on land by now, but had to travel far north to skirt past a hurricane that was tormenting the narrow pass between the Isles and Breles. This boat ride was eating up the time we had to visit Crimson Creek. I was closing in on the eighth month of my pregnancy with every day that passed, and the babies in my family were always born a little early.

But my focus was wholly on Xander. We'd already fought over the way I was treating him and my constant hovering. He said I was driving him insane, and maybe I was. But he rarely touched his food and was sleeping like s**t, so what else was I supposed to do but constantly remind him to eat and shut his eyes?

Xander wrapped his arm around my shoulders as the boat pulled into the port. It was dusk, and the city was dark and empty beyond the port, which was still bustling with warriors. The war camp had turned into a village now, and I noticed women and children walking around. I wondered if people were starting to come back to Breles, to pick up the pieces and continue on with life.

I guess I'd find out.

We disembarked, Xander carrying the single duffle bag we were using to carry our things. Xander kept his arm around my shoulder as we walked through the camp, heading to an area where supplies were being sorted and driven from Breles to Crimson Creek.

We rounded a corner and I felt my breath hitch in my throat as I saw my dad talking with an unfamiliar warrior in the center of the tent-lined street. He turned halfway to us, and his face showed no emotion for a moment as he squinted into the sunset at our backs. But then he turned fully, his hands falling to his sides.

I ran to him, holding my belly as I struggled to keep my breath steady.

"Don't—don't run, I'm coming," Dad said in a strained voice as he ran over to me, throwing his arms around me. "Are you alright? Your mom said you were coming here, but I don't understand why."

"I'm fine. We're going to Crimson Creek to check in our friends," I said into his shoulder. I let him go and stepped away from him, looking up into his face, but he was looking at Xander. "Dad," I said softly, but his gaze didn't falter. He continued to look at Xander, his eyes blank of any and all expression. "He asked me to marry him, and I said yes."

"I know," he replied. "He asked me—"

"You told him no—"

"That was before," he interrupted, a soft smile touching his lips. It was gone in an instant. "He stopped here before he went to Mirage. He asked again."

"And what did you say?"

"I said no, again."

I pursed my lips, but he just tilted his head to the side, chuckling a little.

"Why?"

"Because it's not up to me, Lena. You're in control of your own life. You always have been. I just wish... I'm sorry I wasn't strong enough to show you that from the beginning."

I hugged him again, closing my eyes as I pressed my cheek against his chest.

"There's a train leaving for Crimson Creek in a few minutes," he said quietly. "You need to go now if you want to board—"

"A train? How?"

"We cleared the tracks a few days ago. Everything is starting to feel a little more... better. We're making progress."

A group of civilians walked by carrying baskets of supplies. I watched them as they walked between a pair of tents toward one of the brick commercial builds, which had lights on inside.

"Breles will be rebuilt. People can start coming home, soon, we hope... before winter comes, at least."

I squeezed his arms, smiling. It was over. We'd made it through the war. We were all going to be okay.

I hadn't noticed that Xander had walked up behind me until he laced his fingers in mine, nodding at my dad in greeting. Dad's eyes hardened on Xander for a moment, but he nodded back nonetheless.

Well, their relationship would need some work. But I could confidently say that they would have all the time in the world to form a bond.

My heart felt full and warm as I said goodbye, but only for now, to my dad. Xander and I walked on and eventually found the train station, which was the only repaired building in what seemed like all of Breles.

"Do you remember when we met?" Xander asked as we waited to board the train, which was currently being stocked full of all kinds of supplies for the vampires in Crimson Creek.

I looked up at Xander, twisting my face into a scowl.

"The day you ruined my life, you mean?"

"That's a highly exaggerated accusation," he growled, then leaned down to kiss me on the forehead.

"Yes, I do remember the day we met. But I remember you before that, you know. I went to a party that you were at once, you and Adrian. Adrian was walking around with a huge gash on his forehead and got blood all over Cressida Mayfaire's fancy downtown apartment."

"Yeah, I remember that night. Barely," he laughed. "Do you know how he got that wound?"

"How? I thought it was a fight."

“A keg stand—we don’t... do those in Egoren. It’s safe to say Adrian and I had a great time pretending to be college students, but we were way in over our heads from the beginning.”

A warrior walked up to us, and Xander stepped forward to explain what we were doing there, and our intentions in Crimson Creek. The warrior peered around Xander to look at me, taking in my hair and the striking features I shared with my father and grandmother. He nodded, motioning for us to board one of the three passenger cars connected to the supply train. There were several other people traveling to Crimson Creek. We walked through the first two passenger cars to the third and final one, which had overnight sleeper cabins.

“Is it okay that we use one of these? We don’t even have tickets—”

“I’m the Princess of Valoria’s fiance,” Xander said as he knocked on the cabin door. No one answered, and he shrugged as he opened it and motioned me inside. “Special privileges come with my new title, I would assume.”

“Okay, Alpha King,” I teased. I squeezed into the snug cabin, which wasn’t more than a bench that folded out into a bed and shelving on the other side to hold our duffle bag, as well as an incredibly small bathroom.

I sat down on the bed, signing with relief. My feet were absolutely killing me, and I knew they were swollen.

“You okay?”

“I’m fine, just tired,” I breathed, taking off the clunky orthopedic tennis shoes my mom had bought for me recently. They were the ugliest things I’ve ever seen, and Xander nearly choked himself to death on a laugh when he saw me wear them for the first time, but desperate times called for desperate measures.

I didn’t feel like Alexis was coming anytime soon, unfortunately. I had another few weeks to suffer through ugly shoes and clothes that didn’t fit.

I’d brought a few dresses, which was all that would fit my body as it was now, but Xander tossed me one of his T-shirts to sleep in as we readied for bed. We’d be in Crimson Creek in roughly seven hours, unless the train made other stops. An almost full night’s rest was exactly what I needed.

As long as Xander didn’t have another nightmare... but I pushed the thought from my mind as I settled into the crook of his arm.

The train lurched forward while we laid in the bed, which was uncomfortable, but it was a bed so I couldn’t complain that much.

“Where is Adrian, anyway?” I asked after a few moments of silence.

“He’d better still be in Egoren,” he said with a sleepy chuckle, then sighed. “Abigail and Adrian will be here after Alexis is born, I know that for sure. She wants to visit her family and... well, she wanted to be the one to tell you this so don’t tell her I told you.”

“Told me what?”

“That Adrian and Abigail got married last month,” he said, his knuckles gently stroking my upper arm.

I sighed, smiling as I snuggled into his chest. "That's really good news," I said honestly, smiling a little broader. Our huntress was now a married woman. Who would've thought?

"You're not mad?"

"Why would I be mad?"

"Because she got married without you there."

"Was she worried about that?"

He shrugged. I blew out my breath, laughing a little. "I'm not mad at all. I'm looking forward to seeing them though." A thought sparked in my mind, something I hadn't thought to ask before. "How do you cross over into my realm?"

"Moonstones," he answered matter-of-factly. "We call them moonlight crystals in the Dark Realm, but it's the same thing. They're not like the moonstones in this realm, though—less powerful, from what I understand. Legend has it, when Lycaon created my realm, he filled it with moonstones, deep in the ground, just so he could have a fraction of the powers he would have had if he'd inherited the Goddess's moonstone in full. We mine for them now. That's how I was able to travel through with an army. Everyone had their own crystal."

"Wow—"

"Mine's in my watch, and it's a little different. Those crystals don't work more than twice, to come in and out. I don't know why. But with a moonstone from your realm—" he held up the watch he'd been wearing since the day I met him. I don't think I've ever seen him take it off. "I can come in and out however many times I want."

"What if," I said, my mind beginning to reel as the sunstone necklace around my neck began to warm, "no one needed the moonstones to cross into our realms?"

"What do you mean?"

"What if there wasn't a portal at all? And we were just... open to each other?"

Chapter 636 : His Mate

Lena

Crimson Creek was totally changed. I almost didn't recognize it. Black tents stretched for at least a mile, separated by rows of green, freshly cut grass. Flower baskets hung from every corner of the single street running through the village, and thick curtains were drawn in every window against the sun.

Warriors were walking around with baskets of supplies, some of them slipping into the darkened tents. Others were mingling with the new "locals," the vampires who had escaped their realm and were staying in Crimson Creek.

The vampires were bundled up in dark clothing, their faces shielded by hooded cloaks and sunglasses. I even heard the laughter of children as we walked through the village toward Gideon's property, and the noise brought a sense of peace to my heart.

Peace—that’s what this was. We’d always carry the wounds of war, but now we all had a future to look forward to, and for the majority of these vampires, especially the ones who had been enslaved... a better one.

It took roughly twenty minutes for us to reach Gideon’s property. There was a fresh coat of paint on the house, a bright robin’s egg blue, and the front yard had been mowed. A garden had been planted beneath the front porch, and rose bushes were in full bloom as we walked along the new gravel path leading to the front door. Xander motioned to the old barn, which at one point had been caving in on itself. There was a pile of lumber outside of the barn, and inside I heard the telltale thudding of a hammer hard at work.

“It looks totally different,” I murmured, pausing to look out over the property. Rows of wheat and barley fluttered in a warm breeze in the distance, where the sun kissed the towering grand estates dotting the hills beyond.

“I didn’t think I’d ever want to call Crimson Creek beautiful,” Xander said, squeezing my hand. “But this is just...”

“When did you two get here?”

I whirled around, beaming up at Bethany and Alma, who had come out onto the porch. Alma was dressed in her usual flour-dusted apron, and Bethany was covered in sawdust and grease. I let out my breath, then let go of Xander’s hand so I could waddle over to them.

“It’s so good to see you,” I breathed as I hugged them both. Even Alma softened into my embrace, which warmed my heart. I could feel Xander’s smile from where he was still standing in the yard.

“I thought I smelled you on my property,” came Gideon’s voice, lifted in a laugh as Xander and Gideon clapped each other on the back. Gideon was also covered in sawdust and had obviously been the one working in the barn when we’d walked up.

“You’re just in time for lunch,” Alma said as she took my hand and led me into the house.

I glanced over my shoulder at Bethany, Gideon, and Xander as they followed behind, and had done so just in time to notice Gideon’s longing gaze as he met Bethany’s eye, a soft smile touching his lips.

Xander caught this too, and he gave me a knowing smile before I turned back around and followed Alma into the house.

“So, it’ll take them some time to adjust. Is what you’re saying?” Xander said as he leaned back away from his empty plate, his eyes focused on Gideon, who was seated at the head of the table.

“Right. It’s not that they can’t be in the sun, but it hurts, and will likely hurt for a while. Even we struggle, and we were born in this realm. Right, Alma?” Gideon replied.

Alma nodded as she rose to collect the dishes, waving away my offer to help her. We’d been discussing the vampire refugees over plates of roast beef and a salad made from the greens Bethany had planted. It was delicious, and I’d had two helpings already, and was looking forward to whatever dessert Alma had planned. I could smell cinnamon and chocolate in the air, with a pinch of blood root, of course.

“So, the hybrids and the king’s guards were the only ones who couldn’t be in the sun? Is that what you’re saying?” Xander pressed, crossing his arms over his chest.

Gideon shrugged, then nodded. “Sure, I guess. The sun here is also incredibly intense for these people, you know. Most of them couldn’t handle being in the sun for very long in their own realm. Also, you have to understand that we didn’t deal with the king and his beasts until five years ago, at the most. We’re learning something new about these people every day. They’re different from us in a lot of ways. They need blood to survive a lot more than we do, for one. They’re not accustomed to eating blood root for that purpose, and it has made some of them sick, mostly the children. The supplies being sent to Crimson are keeping people fed and clothed, however.”

“What of Zeke?” Xander asked, and for a moment Gideon’s face darkened.

“He’s... uh, well. He’s had to break up a few conflicts in the village so far, but otherwise his time is spent with the ambassadors—”

“Trying to find a solution as to how to house these people, and where?” Xander interjected, and Gideon nodded.

“The old estates have been filled by the larger families, housing multiple generations. There’s been talk of some of the vampires going east, which I think is a good idea. The lower vampires had four underground kingdoms from what I understand. Zeke is now king of Brune, the largest of the kingdoms. They’ll likely stay here in Crimson Creek. The rest of the kingdoms lost their leaders in the war. There’s been talk of moving them to Winter Forest, or giving them their own territory far north—”

“Winter Forest?” I asked, shocked rippling through me. I glanced between Xander and Gideon. “I thought they were being sent to Mirage?”

“Lincoln and I discussed it that day we visited him and Carly,” Xander replied, tapping his fingers on his arms. “He’s in agreement that Mirage isn’t a suitable option. The climate is one thing. It’s far too sunny, and the days are long. Winter Forest is shrouded in night most of the year—” Xander paused to heave a breath before continuing. “And, Winter Forest has already put a call out that they will be welcoming to any and all vampire refugees seeking asylum, unlike the other packs.”

I c****d my head to the side, narrowing my eyes on Xander.

“I’ve been in contact with your grandparents,” he shrugged. “Their people put it to a vote, and no one in the entirety of the pack voted not to accept the vampires as citizens of Winter Forest.”

“It’s not a bad idea,” I said honestly. I had no argument against it, in fact. I was just surprised. Winter Forest was dark most of the year. Summer was an issue, given that the sun hardly set, but it wasn’t nearly as intense as the climate in the southern territories.

Alma slid a slice of chocolate cake in front me accompanied by a glass of milk, and I immediately lost interest in the conversation taking place at the other end of the table.

“Henry is coming for dinner tonight,” I heard Gideon say, followed by an arch of his brows.

Bethany had retreated to the kitchen to help with the dishes, and I noticed Gideon's eyes flick toward the kitchen door, which was slightly ajar. Xander raised his brows at Gideon, who only shrugged, his cheeks coloring a bit as he dropped his gaze.

"Are you and Bethany seeing each other?" I asked, which elicited a warning glance from Xander.

Gideon leaned back in his chair, watching me closely.

"I'm going to ask her to marry me—"

"What!" I said excitedly, gripping my fork.

"If Henry approves."

Xander blew out his breath, chuckling as he looked back at Gideon. "Good luck with that one."

"Well, if you can somehow convince the Alpha King of Valoria to let you marry his daughter, I might just have a chance against Henry, right?"

"How is Henry?" I asked, then forked the last bite of chocolate cake from my plate and popped it into my mouth.

"He's great, actually. He's still living in his cottage on the old Radcliffe estate and helping out the family who lives there now with the farm and such. He comes here from time to time. Bethany has been staying with us to help rebuild the barn."

My heart squeezed at the warmth in Gideon's voice, but I felt a shadow creep over the air, sucking all the joy from the room.

"Has Oliver been here recently?" Xander asked, the shadow crossing over his face.

Gideon shook his head, running his tongue along his lower lip. "No, I haven't seen him in weeks—"

The front door swung open and two people walked inside. I blinked, thinking I was dreaming. I looked back down at my plate, then back up again, my fork falling from my hand as the figures remained in the doorway, their voices lifted in girlish chatter.

"Damnit, Ianthe. We missed lunch again—" Elaine's voice abruptly silenced as she met my eye, her mouth forming a perfect O.

Xander rose from his chair, which fell to the floor behind him in his haste to stand. Gideon ran his hand over his face, peaking at Xander between his fingers.

"I forgot to mention—"

"Where the hell have you been?" Xander said sharply as Elaine colored deeply.

I saw it then. It hit me like a freight train, my chest tightening severely as I looked over Elaine's face. How I hadn't noticed before, I didn't know. But she looked like Abigail, so much so that I felt like I was looking at Abigail now, but with different eyes. They were the same height with the same curly, auburn hair. Elaine's hair was shoulder length where Abigail's was long, however. And Elaine wasn't nearly as girly and prim as Abigail.

But they were twins. I could see it. I could feel it.

I rose from my seat, wringing my hands together.

"I have a lot to explain," Elaine whispered, glancing at Ianthe, who nodded her head to continue.

"Did you know you were kidnapped as a baby?" I choked, unable to stop the tears from welling in my eyes. "D-did you know—"

"I did. I mean, I—I do—but it's not what it sounds like—"

"Then what—"

"Lena," Xander said sharply, and I turned to him as I wiped tears from my eyes.

How long had Elaine been here, in this realm? Did she know about Oliver? Did she know that they were mates, and he was currently out doing Goddess knows what in Goddess knows where because he thought he sacrificed her in order to save our realm?

"Who are you?" I said, looking right at her.

Chapter 637 : The Silver Eyed Wolf

Lena

Elaine took a few steps forward, her jaw flexing as she swallowed.

"Lena, you and I need to talk—"

"Obviously!" I nearly shouted, rounding the table.

I passed Alma, who was standing in the doorway to the kitchen with two plates of chocolate cake, looking more annoyed than confused.

Gideon rose to his feet, glancing at Xander before he motioned for Alma to retreat into the kitchen.

Ianthe gave me a tight-lipped smile as she sidestepped around me and left the room, leaving Elaine and me alone.

Except for Xander, of course, who was standing on the other side of the dining room table looking just as shocked as I was.

"Elaine," I breathed, my initial shock ebbing away into outright confusion. "What happened?"

Elaine sighed deeply, running her fingers along the top of the couch as she walked toward us. I noticed the faded bruising along her jaw, and the scar along the bridge of her nose as she came into the light of the chandelier above her head.

"I don't know how to explain what happened to me," she said, glancing from me to Xander.

"You need to try," Xander said flatly, righting the chair he'd knocked over in his haste to stand up.

I sat in one of the armchairs, keeping my eyes focused on Elaine, unblinking.

"I heard the two of you met Andromeda," she said in a whisper, her eyes sparkling with understanding. "I just missed you there. I'd just left—"

"Elaine," Xander exhaled, tapping his fingers on the dining room table. "What happened? We need to know everything, from the beginning.

"You're my friend's twin—"

"I didn't know about my sister until the war," she breathed with a pained expression as she sat on the couch, running her hands over her jeans. "I didn't know. I thought.... It sounds crazy, but I can't remember a time I wasn't in Crimson Creek. I was just here one day, and all of these memories I thought I had... of a family, of parents—" She tapered off, shaking her head.

"I saw Ben the night Xander and I went out into the hills when he wanted to collect a sample of the blood root. I thought... I thought Ben was in danger. He was screaming but not—not for me—"

Xander tilted his head to the side, a sudden realization creeping over his face. "Who was he screaming for? I didn't hear anything—"

"He was screaming for you, Xander. That's when I knew something was wrong. Ben wouldn't have... he was looking right at me, I thought. He was walking toward us. I knew it wasn't him when I saw his face clearly. It wasn't him, but it was his voice. That's when I told you we needed to get out of there."

"But why did you go back?" I asked, my skin prickling with adrenaline.

Alexis kicked me, hard, and I wrapped my arms around my belly as if sheltering her, protecting her from whatever Elaine was about to reveal.

"Because something clicked inside my head when I saw Ben, something I'd been battling with for a long time. When I read your palm, Lena... I actually saw something. I'd be reading tea leaves and palms because that's what I remembered being able to do, for whatever reason, even though I had no memories of my time before Crimson Creek. I was just there. I woke up to Maxwell hovering over me one day, saying I'd hit my head. I thought—I thought that was why—"

"Elaine," Xander said sharply.

Elaine glanced up at him, swallowing hard. "I, uh. When I read your palm, I saw this place... wooded and just beautiful, a dream. I felt this pull toward it, and when I saw Ben in the hills, I felt that pull again. So, I went back out in the hills. I went to the same place I'd taken Xander and I just.... A woman appeared out of nowhere, begging me to come with her, pleading with me. She told me I needed to come home."

A chill ran down the length of my spine as Elaine folded her hands between her thighs, rocking her body back and forth.

"Suddenly I wasn't in this realm anymore. I was in... you know."

"Then what happened?"

"The woman and I hid during the night. During the day we traveled far, across the realm, I am sure. We came to the water, that strange sea and a boat appeared."

“You went to Andromeda—”

“Listen,” Elaine said, taking a shallow breath. “I didn’t know about my biological family at all until I reached Andromeda’s realm. That’s what it is, you know. It’s still there. That’s where I’ve been, all this time. That’s where I was taken when I was a child.” She rolled up her sleeve, her pale skin glistening in the amber light of the chandelier. She revealed a pale pink mark in the crook of her elbow, something that looked like a half moon scar. “I was born with it. It’s a witch’s mark. I am a shifter by blood, but somewhere in my family’s line is a witch who passed her powers down, but not everyone has it. Abigail,” she said, tears in her eyes, “she didn’t have it. No one in my family knew what it was, or what it meant. I was taken from my home as a child and taken to Winter Forest, through the portal in the temple to the realm of the witches, so that I could live with my own kind.”

“You were raised there—”

“I remember it now,” she said tearfully. “I was sent out, back to this realm, to spy. That was my purpose. I was sent out to guard over you, Lena. I went to Morhan looking for you. But then I was... I still don’t remember how I ended up in Crimson Creek. Those memories are blurry. But Maxwell did something to me, he did something—”

“He took your memories,” Xander interrupted. “Just like Bethany—”

“Yes. He did. And when the witches caught wind of what was happening, they called me home. Lena, when you brought the portal down—”

“I didn’t,” I choked, my throat tightening around a sob. She didn’t know, did she? She didn’t know about Oliver.

“But—”

“How did you get here?” Xander asked, eyeing me before looking back at Elaine.

A silent plea rippled through our bond and I understood him completely. Announcing that we knew her mate... it wasn’t for us to say. That was sacred.

“Andromeda sent me through the portal in the temple. She told me my work for her was done, and to go home. But I didn’t know where home was. So, I came back here. I got here a few days ago.” She looked meditative for a moment, her eye’s glistening with some recent memory. “I thought I felt the mate bond in her realm. I was sure, even if for a moment.”

“Lena, can you go find Alma?” Xander said abruptly.

Elaine and I looked at him, but he nodded at me, his face void of expression. I chewed my lower lip as I rose, giving Elaine a weak smile. She looked somewhat fearful of being left alone with Xander.

“I’ll be back—”

“Lena,” Xander said in a low growl that made the down hair on my arms stand on end. What did he mean to do?

I hurried out of the room, walking into the kitchen and closing the door behind me. I let out the breath I'd been holding and came face to face with Alma, Gideon, Ianthe, and Bethany.

"Do any of you have any idea where Oliver might be?" I whispered.

Alma set a dish back in the sink, her face falling at the mention of his name.

"He mentioned New Dianny; that's all we know."

Xander

Elaine was telling the truth, of that I was sure. But I needed to talk to her alone about what was going to happen next. Elaine was going to come back to Valoria with us. She was going to be there when Adrian and Abigail arrived. Elaine was going to meet Oliver, and I wasn't going to argue about it.

I was done with magic and prophecies. I was done with the games of the gods. I didn't care that Elaine's sole purpose in life had been to spy on and guard Lena. Now, that role was on me, as her mate. Elaine's work was done.

Elaine scurried away and retreated to a bedroom upstairs. Ianthe gave me a skeptical side-eyed glance before following her upstairs.

Witches—what was I supposed to do with witches?

Nothing, I decided. This was done. It was over. And in a few months, Lena and I would return to Egoren and close this chapter behind us, for good. I was going to let the Realm of Light deal with this mess.

Henry arrived for dinner, which ended up being a tense battle of wits because he, Gideon, and I that none of the women had an interest in subjecting themselves to. Gideon had it in mind to ask Henry for Bethany's hand in marriage sometime tonight, and I quickly ushered Lena out of the house, deciding we didn't need to be present for whatever fight was about to ensue.

Instead, I took her out into the hills.

There was one thing I wanted to do, and that was to see her wolf.

"There's no reason why you can't shift while pregnant. You're perfectly healthy," I said as we walked hand and hand out of Gideon's property and into the rolling hills beyond. The moon was high and full, casting a silver beam of light before us.

"I know," she said lightly, giving me a mischievous grin. "I go out on the castle grounds almost every night. I'm trying to keep myself in shape."

She let go of my hand and walked forward as we walked into a shallow glen. I watched as she began to take off her clothes, slowly, glancing back at me as her naked body glimmered in the light of the moon.

My breath was caught in my throat, my body suddenly aching with desire as she stepped out of the pile of clothes and walked even farther away from me.

"Lena, wait—"

I blinked, and Lena was gone, replaced by something I'd seen before, but only in books of lore and myth.

A wolf of the purest white stood yards away from me. Her eyes were pure silver, glistening like moonstones in the moonlight. Her fur was very long, fluttering in the breeze like strands of silk.

And as she walked into the moonbeam illuminating the clearing, silver and white flowers bloomed in her wake.

She turned back to look at me, and all I could think to do was bow.

I was standing before the Moon Goddess herself, and she was my mate.

I shifted, my obsidian fur such a deep contrast to her own. We ran side by side into the moonlight.

I thought of the prophecy I'd studied as a boy.

"Two lines into one, the builder seeks her throne—"

Was that throne Egoren? Could it even be Egoren?

Chapter 638 : He's Dead

Lena

Two Weeks Later

Mom huffed out a breath, a garment clip clamped between her teeth as she fussed with the back of the fluffy white dress I was wearing. I grunted in response, looking into the full-length mirror at my reflection.

The dress was only tight around my breasts and fluffed out over my body in a "baby-doll" style that suited the growing swell of my belly to the point that it was hard to tell I was even pregnant. Silky puffy sleeves tapered off at my wrists.

"I look like a cream puff," I laughed, glancing at Mom over my shoulder.

She rolled her eyes, shaking her head as she bent back down to her task of fitting my now incredibly large breasts into the dress, once again.

"I like cream puffs," Elaine said from the sofa on the other side of the airy, brightly colored sitting room in Castle Drogomor, her legs crossed on the coffee table.

Clare snorted with mirth as she flipped through Maeve's huge leather-bound spell book that was sitting on her lap.

Sasha was skipping from one side of the room to the other, humming a little song as she pranced. Clare and Sasha were settled in Winter Forest but had come down for the wedding, which was taking place in three weeks. Clare seemed happy to be here early, and she quickly fell in step with Elaine, the two of them becoming fast friends.

I was a little jealous of that, especially since Clare still seemed skeptical of me, for whatever reason.

I chalked it up to her personality, which was probably the truth. She was just a grumpy, somewhat cold person.

Elaine, on the other hand, was back to being a ray of sunshine. I still couldn't believe she was here. And I was glad that she was because it was all hands on deck. The wedding preparations were in full swing, the date set for the summer solstice itself.

Mom put the last garment clip in place and leaned back to examine her work, nodding at herself as she made me turn in a circle.

"I'll have to take it out again before the wedding," she said, more to herself than to me.

"It's beautiful, Mom," I assured her as I raised my arms towards the ceiling on her command so she could see how the fabric fell.

"Are you going to wear a veil?" Elaine asked, flipping through a wedding magazine.

Clare frowned at her, shaking her head. "She needs to wear a crown; she's a princess after all."

"I hadn't thought that far—"

"Well, you should have," Clare said leaning back into the couch cushions. "You have like, twenty days until the wedding."

I waved my hand at her in dismissal as Mom turned me back toward the mirror.

"I think I'm going to wear my hair up," I told Mom, but then I noticed the tears glistening in her eyes. "Mom? What's the matter?"

"You're just—oh, honey. You're so beautiful—"

"Please don't cry," I begged, tears beginning to well in my own eyes. I'd been a mess of emotions the past two weeks since we returned from Crimson Creek. Reality was setting in, and I found myself crying over the smallest things. Only this morning I'd cried over a pair of the tiniest socks I'd ever seen in my life while sorting through the baby clothes I'd purchased. Xander had been so confused, and had resorted to patting the top of my head while I dissolved into a puddle of tears on the carpet, the socks clutched in my hands.

"I'm just so happy—"

"Lena looks like a snow fairy!" Sasha shouted from the other side of the room, and we all turned around to look at her.

"Sasha!" Clare exclaimed, rising from the couch.

I tried not to laugh as Clare stalked over to her daughter, who had climbed one of the bookshelves and was reaching for a vase, her tiny fingers splayed in determination.

I heard male voices in the hallway, and suddenly the door to the sitting room began to open.

"STOP!" Mom cried, and whoever was behind the door halted their progress.

"Xander will stay in the hallway," Dad said quickly, and behind the door I heard Xander's muffled protest as Dad pushed him away before he slid into the room.

Dad walked in, shutting the door firmly behind me, then his eyes landed on mine.

"Wow," he said, a wry smile touching his mouth.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Wow? That's all you have to say?"

"You look like—"

"A cream puff?" Elaine snorted.

Dad let out his breath in a whoosh, shaking his head. "You look beautiful, Lena. You really do."

"If you're only here to tease me," I said firmly as Mom began to stick pins along the back of the dress to mark where she needed to adjust the fit of the dress, "then go away!"

"I'm just here to deliver the RSVPs to your wedding coordinators," he said with a shrug, then tossed a pile of envelopes on the couch next to Elaine. "I can take Sasha off your hands, as well," he said to Clare, who was red in the face as she tried to pry Sasha off the bookshelf. Sasha, who had been whining and holding on to the bookcase for dear life, immediately let go and fell back into her mother's arms, then squirmed to get away.

"I want to go outside!" she practically screamed.

"Well, that's perfect. Xander and I are going to have lunch in the front garden—"

"No climbing trees, Sasha. Those tights are new!" Clare protested, but Dad and Sasha were already at the door.

Sasha turned around and stuck her tongue out at her mom before slipping outside, and Dad gave her an apologetic glance before he left as well, shutting the door behind him.

Clare ran her hands over her face as she rounded the couch, plopping down on top of the envelopes Elaine was hurrying to gather. "She's been such a handful lately."

"She's only five," Mom smiled. "She'll grow out of it."

"I—I hope so," Clare replied, but something in her tone made my chest tighten with unease.

I turned to her as Mom helped me out of my sleeves so I could step out of the dress, wearing nothing but a silken white shift.

"What's wrong, Clare?" I asked as I pulled a robe over my shoulders and tied it on top of my belly.

Clare raised her eyebrows, her eyes downcast in her lap.

"I worry she'll be like her father," she answered honestly. Clare had been a word away from telling my mom and me the name of Sasha's father, but we'd been interrupted by a warrior coming up to us to tell us Breles had fallen to the vampires. The memory of the moment fluttered through my chest, leaving behind nothing but pain.

“Who was he?” I asked, but Mom interrupted me, her face cast in a shadow of unease.

“You had an older brother, right? Was Carl also his father?” Mom asked.

Clare shifted uncomfortably, reaching beneath her to grab the envelopes she was sitting on and giving them to Elaine.

“No, just me and Hale. I don’t think my dad ever knew, and my mom was long gone by the time I found out the truth from... from Sasha’s father.”

“Who was he?” I asked again, trying and failing to hide the unease on my face.

Something hadn’t been sitting right ever since I found out about Clare’s past. Something that chipped away at me every time I looked at Sasha, a familiarity of some kind, like I’d seen her features before, features so different from Clare’s.

“His name is Slate—”

I had to steady myself against the wall, my stomach tying into a knot. Mom looked from Clare to me, then rushed to me.

“I’m fine—”

Clare was looking right at me, her face flushing as she watched my reaction. “Lena, do you know him?”

“Slate—Slate Tamlin?” I said on an exhale, meeting her eyes.

“You know him?” Clare rose from the couch, her eyes narrowed into a deathly glare. “How the f**k do you know him?”

“He’s dead,” I said, shaking my head. “I killed him. I killed him in the vampire realm.”

A hush fell over the room, all eyes on me as they waited for me to continue. I kept my gaze on Clare, watching as a wave of relief rushed across her face, blurring the heavy lines of suspicion.

“He’s dead,” I said with conviction. “I made sure of it.”

“How?” she asked, taking a step toward me. “How are you so sure?”

“Because he was turned into one of them, one of the vampire guards. He was working for the king. He was the reason I was sent to Crimson Creek in the first place. Everything he did to me, everything was... was to get me to Crimson Creek, and then to the vampire realm. I stabbed him in the chest with a wooden blade, and he turned to ash. He’s gone, forever. He’s gone, and Sasha is safe.”

Clare didn’t blink. She didn’t move, either. After a few long moments of silence, she inhaled sharply, shrugging her shoulders as she walked back to the couch and sat down, snatching several envelopes out of Elaine’s hands and ripping them open.

“The Alpha and Luna of Sapphire River will attend, as well as their adult daughter,” she said nonchalantly as the rest of us stared.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

Her face was totally blank as she met my eye. She stared at me for a moment, blinking, then looked back down at the letter in her hands. "Never been better," she said casually, as if I hadn't just dropped a truth bomb in her lap.

I opened my mouth to reply, but thought better of it, snapping my mouth shut as I turned to look at my mom with a pleading expression.

"I'm going to order a lunch service," Mom said, her eyes darting toward Clare with a look of marked concern.

Elaine had her brow furrowed at Clare, who was ripping each envelope open with vigor.

I saw a single tear roll down Clare's cheek, and her hands began to tremble.

"Clare," I said, just as she dissolved into sobs.

Elaine and I wrapped our arms around her, holding onto her for dear life.

"Fuck-him—" she choked, her entire body shaking. "I'm glad he's dead. I've never been more glad about anything in my entire f*****g life!"

Anger was evident in every word as she struggled to take a breath.

"He deserved it! I hope it was f*****g painful! I hope it hurt him as much as it—as much as he hurt-me!"

I sucked in a sob, meeting Elaine's eyes as she rocked Clare between us. Mom returned to the sitting room, running toward us with a cup of tea in her hands. I smelled the bourbon she'd laced the tea with before she thrust it into Clare's hands. Clare drank deeply, the tea likely burning her throat on the way down, but her body began to still, her breaths becoming more regular as her sobs subsided.

"Thank you Lena," she croaked, reaching up to cup my cheek. "Thank you. Thank you—" she kissed me on the mouth, a single peck.

I leaned my forehead against hers as she dissolved in tears again.

I felt a tinge of pain in my side all of the sudden, and a practice contraction rippled over my belly. I slowly let go of her, then turned to Mom, who was watching me closely.

"Go lay down for a while, Lena," Mom coaxed, her hand coming around my back as I rose from the couch. "I'll stay with them."

"Okay," I said, wiping tears from my eyes as I walked toward the door. I glanced back at Clare one last time before I left the room, shutting the door behind me.

I turned to the sound of footsteps in the hallway and met eyes with Xander as he stopped and turned to face me.

"I'm going to take a nap," I said, exhaustion gripping me just as another contraction tightened around me, painless but tight.

"I'll go with you," he said, extending his hand to me.

I took it, but I struggled to exhale as I looked up at him.

“Slate was Sasha’s father,” I said, blinking away tears.

Sold as the Alpha King’s Breeder

Chapter 639 : We’re Having a Baby Today

Lena

I watched through the window in my bedroom as Xander kicked a ball as far as he could into the back garden, Sasha’s golden hair flying out behind her as she chased it into the tall grass. Xander turned around, laughing and saying something inaudible to my dad and Troy. Troy and Maeve had just arrived a few hours ago from Winter Forest. My grandparents were here as well, but they were napping, tired from their journey to Mirage.

No one else was set to arrive this far from the wedding, but it was nice to have some time with them before the festivities began.

“When is Abigail getting here again?” Maeve said from my bed. She was lounging with a notepad on her lap, her hair piled on the top of her head. Mom was sitting next to her, folding tiny baby clothes.

“Tonight. Last I heard, they were passing the Isles,” I replied, waving down at Xander as the group of men looked up to my window.

Now that we had a date for the wedding, which was quickly approaching, I’d had Xander send word to his own realm. I let out my breath as I watched Xander interact with my family. Dad and Xander had been spending a lot of time together lately. I was thankful for it. It seemed like they were starting to get along, just in time for the wedding, too.

“Any word from Oliver?” Maeve asked.

I shook my head, turning to face her in time to notice the pain rippled over her face.

“I sent invitations to New Dianny. That’s where I was told he might be,” I said softly, crossing the room to lie down on the edge of my bed, facing my mom and aunt.

Elaine and Clare had gone out on an adventure in Mirage, neither of them familiar with the city. Maeve hadn’t met Elaine yet, and I was reluctant to mention that Xander and I believed Elaine was the mate Oliver believed he sacrificed to save his realm. I was praying to whoever was listening that Oliver would show up to my wedding just so he could see her and the bond would snap into place. Maybe, just maybe, he’d be able to heal.

I heaved a breath as my belly tightened painfully. Mom sat up a little straighter, but Maeve smirked, nudging Mom playfully.

“She’s fine, Hanna. She could have this baby today and they would both be fine.”

“She’d be four weeks early!” Mom protested.

“All of the babies in this family have been early,” Maeve shrugged. “Well, Lena was only two weeks early, but still. They’d be fine.”

"I hope she doesn't come early," I said, running my hands over my face. "You'd have to adjust my dress a fifth time, Mom."

Mom rolled her eyes. "I'm more worried about you giving birth at your own wedding."

"Well, my wedding would be the talk of the town forever, if that's the case. It would save me from being sucked into an endless conversation with Aunt Georgia and Aunt Vicky!"

Maeve snorted, flipping to a new page in her notepad.

It was quiet for a moment as we listened to Sasha's screaming protests three stories below as the men tried to coax her inside for lunch.

"What was my own birth like?" I asked, looking at Mom.

Maeve set the notepad down, turning to Mom as well.

"Painful," Mom said matter-of-factly. "But compared to your aunt and grandma, I had a pretty straightforward birth. It was the... the weeks after that were difficult."

"Why?" I asked, looking from Mom to Maeve.

Maeve's eyes darkened, a fleeting memory passing behind her eyes.

"I was... I wasn't well, mentally. Not for a while. I think I was just..."

"We were all still reeling from what happened with Tasia, and the prophecy," Maeve said softly, giving Mom a weak smile.

Mom smiled back, her eyes creasing with understanding. "We didn't know what to expect, Lena. That's all. I didn't feel... I didn't feel adequate. I didn't feel like I was good enough to be your-your mom."

I opened my mouth to reply that of course she was good enough to be my mom, and ask why she would think that, but then I saw the tears welling in the corners of her eyes, and my heart began to crack.

"Mom—"

"Maeve and your grandma came to me shortly after you were born. They helped me through it, and as you got older... you were just this ray of light in my life, honey. I was so proud of you, so in love with you. Your dad and I discussed having another baby but you were just... enough. You were enough for us, for me."

My heart was in my throat as I looked into her eyes.

"We didn't need any more boys in the family; that's why they didn't have another. They didn't want to risk it!" Maeve teased.

Mom let out a little laugh. I exhaled, thankful for the look of peace that crossed over my mom's face. Mom cleared her throat, fixing me with a smile.

"You're going to be fine, Lena. And if Alexis is born—"

"Alexis? You named her?" Maeve said excitedly, sitting up a little straighter.

I nodded, fighting back a grin.

"Xander and I recently decided on her middle name," I said, toying with the creases in the comforter.

"Oh? Are you going to tell us, or keep it a secret?" Maeve pressed.

"Alexis Hanna," I said, meeting my mom's eyes. "Alexis Hanna Crimson."

Xander

"I bet he'll show up," Troy said, tossing the rubber ball against the side of the castle while Sasha jumped up to try to grab it. We'd tried and failed to usher the little girl inside for lunch, and we were now back outside on the patio, eating chicken nuggets and french fries in the sun.

I crossed my arms over my chest, turning to look at Ethan, who was sitting with his legs crossed looking down at the chicken nuggets with a skeptical expression shadowing his face. He picked one up, turning it back and forth before shaking his head and putting it back down again.

"I invited him and his mate, as well as Theo and Ciana. It's a long journey, and a big ask. It's likely Lena and I will have a second wedding in Egoren when we return," I said, leaning against the castle wall with my arms crossed over my chest.

Rowan only nodded. I knew he was still struggling with the idea of me taking his only daughter and only child, as well as his soon-to-be granddaughter, back to my realm.

It wasn't like he couldn't visit, and we would be visiting often as well.

Still, it was a great distance... a great distance, and an entirely other realm.

"Soren won't come," Ethan declared.

I eyed him, then let my hands fall to my sides. "Why wouldn't he?"

"Why would he?" Ethan replied.

I looked at Rowan, who shrugged.

"Because I invited him, and Lena is his, what, great niece? Right?"

"What, Ethan? Are you afraid he's going to come back and stake a claim to the old truck that's still in your garage in Winter Forest?" Troy laughed, which elicited a glare from Ethan. Troy was truly fearless.

The door to the patio opened and Hanna stepped out, looking around until she found me, her eyes widening.

"I think you should come upstairs," she said quickly, "Lena isn't feeling well."

Troy caught the rubber ball, and Rowan stood up from his chair.

"Is she alright? Is it the baby—"

“Maybe,” Hanna said, the corners of her mouth twitching. I could tell she was trying not to smile, but there was definitely worry in her eyes.

“Okay,” I said, glancing at the men before following Hanna into the castle.

I heard Troy exclaim excitedly, as the door shut behind us, something about Rowan entering what I thought I heard as “the old man phase” of his life. Ethan grunted in response, so I assumed I’d caught the words correctly.

“Where is she?” I asked, following Hanna towards the stairs.

“Laying down in her room. She’s been uncomfortable all morning—”

“She’s been uncomfortable for days,” I corrected, my voice dropping an octave as we climbed the stairs. I couldn’t help but be excited. My heart was hammering in my chest as we turned and walked briskly down the corridor. I entered our room without knocking, finding Lena bent over the bed, her cheek pressing into the mattress.

“I do not feel well,” she huffed, her cheeks reddened and hair slightly damp with sweat.

Maeve was rubbing her back, her mouth pulled into a wide smile.

“You two are having a baby today; I guarantee it—”

“Don’t say that!” Lena snapped, burying her face in the quilt over our bed.

I sighed deeply as I walked over to Lena, running my fingers through her hair.

“Let’s go for a walk, okay? Just you and I. I bet it’ll make you feel better.” I turned to Maeve, then Hanna. “Is she in labor, for sure?”

“Early labor,” Hanna said with conviction, nodding her head. She looked a little pale, but the excitement was shining behind her eyes.

“Have the midwife come, but we’re not going to panic. Okay? Right, Lena?”

“I’m not panicking,” she said into the bed. “But my wedding dress—”

“Don’t worry about the dress!” Hanna exclaimed, throwing her hands in the air.

Lena looked up, her face reddened with pain and frustration.

“Let’s go for a walk, come on,” I coaxed, lifting Lena off the bed by her armpits.

She bared her teeth at all of us, looking more like a demon in need of an exorcism than my occasionally kindhearted mate. I definitely needed to get her out of the castle before she started cussing at all of us.

This was going to be a long, long day, and probably an even longer night.

“Come on, let’s go,” I said, patting her lower back.

She slipped her feet into a pair of slippers and shuffled forward, swatting my hand away. I exhaled through my nose as I walked past Maeve and Hanna, mouthing “stay calm” as I passed. Maeve was

about to break into a fit of excited giggles, and Hanna was still pale, but she seemed a little more at ease now that I was taking over.

Truthfully, my stomach was tied in a tight knot. I'd been in battle. I'd stared death in the face. I'd even died, and then come back to life.

But I'd never been on the cusp of becoming a father, and I felt totally and utterly unprepared.

I held onto Lena as she walked down the stairs, her face screwed up in a face of utter determination to not have this baby today.

"You're going to be alright," I said. It was the wrong thing to say.

"If you say another word to me," she growled, "I'm going to rip you to pieces." She bent over as we reached the second-floor landing, huffing out her breath. She straightened up, looking me in the eyes, and looking absolutely feral.

"I won't say another word," I said, hiding the smile threatening to spread across my face.

We were having a baby. We were having a baby today.

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder

Chapter 640 : Labor Pains

Lena

Xander was walking a few paces behind me. He glanced down at his watch from time to time, especially whenever I bent over with my hands on my knees, trying to catch my breath every time a contraction ripped from my lower back and settled over my belly.

"Are you doing okay?" he asked as I wiped tears from my eyes, refusing to look at him.

"What am I supposed to do with a newborn at our wedding, Xander?" I asked hotly, swallowing back a sob. I was delirious with pain and heavy, crippling anxiety. I felt several conflicting emotions at once, and all of them threatened to send me over the edge into a full-blown breakdown.

I couldn't blame anyone but myself for having our wedding only a week before my due date. Summer Solstice was a major holiday, and it felt like the perfect time to gather our family together to celebrate. I figured Alexis would be right on time.

But she had other plans—early plans, it seemed.

Maybe I could blame Xander a little bit. He needed to return to Egoren before the end of the summer, which meant we were pressed for time anyway. I felt an irrational rage toward him as the contraction continued to run down my back like claws, but that fury began to wane as the pain loosened its grip on my body.

"Whatever it is we're supposed to do with a newborn," he replied, keeping his expression neutral and avoiding eye contact. "Feed them, change them, find them a warm body to snuggle against—"

"You're not helping!"

“What can I do, Lena?” he said, glancing at me before looking down at his watch. I straightened up as the contraction began to ease. “That was a long one—”

I started walking away from him, and he gave me a few seconds to put some distance between us before he followed.

It didn’t take him long to catch up with me, however. We walked along the edge of the front garden, and for the first time in my life, the smell of the summer blooms made me sick to my stomach. I paused to try to catch my breath and glanced up at Xander, who was watching me closely.

“I’m not having a contraction!”

“Alright, alright,” he murmured, his eyes still laser-focused on my own. “Do you want to sit down for a moment?”

“Not here,” I breathed, sucking in my breath and charging forward again. Xander sighed as he followed through the garden and out the other side, where we walked along the treeline of the forest that surrounded the castle. The grass that took up the fields in the back of the castle was nearly as tall as me, but when we reached the edge of the sprawling castle grounds, we came upon a clearing with soft, short grass and moss. A creek bubbled through the trees and ran across the clearing, and I quickly took off my slippers and dipped my feet in the water, sighing in relief.

“Are your feet hurting?”

“Yes. Ahh...” I bent forward, my hands resting on my knees as another contraction rippled over my midsection. I found it hard to breathe for a moment and felt Xander’s hand resting on my lower back as the pain thrummed and then ebbed away.

I knew he was watching his watch as closely as he was watching me. He was timing my contractions. We’d taken a single childbirth class during our time in Mirage. A midwife had come to the castle, and we sat on the floor in the library with our legs crossed. She’d led us through several positions that might help me feel more comfortable while I was in labor, almost all of them assisted by Xander in some way. We’d giggled and joked through it, and I’d been happy, enjoying Xander’s company and enthusiasm.

But right now I didn’t want to be touched. I didn’t want to be looked at, and I didn’t want to be talked to.

I was grateful that Xander could sense this. He was lingering a few feet away from me, peering down at the creek as we both waited for the contraction to pass.

I staggered backward and lowered myself to the ground, then laid on my back, wrapping my arms around my stomach.

“I’m fine,” I blurted before Xander could ask if I was okay.

He gave me a soft smile, walking toward me cautiously before sitting down in the grass a few feet away, stretching his legs out in front of him.

“Is there anything I can do to make you more comfortable?” he asked, then paused. “Other than f*****g off and leaving you alone?”

I snorted with mirth as I reached out to pick at the grass, my face tilting toward the sun. Clouds were moving overhead, slow and lazy against a deep blue sky.

“Maybe you could just talk to me—”

“About what?”

I turned to look at him, smiling at the way the sun danced over his face. Oh, Xander. I was lucky to have such a handsome, caring mate—even if he was bossy, and a little controlling, and sometimes incredibly irritating. I felt a wave of undying love and appreciation wash over me, but it was quickly replaced by another round of tight, unending pain and pressure. The smile I’d been giving him quickly turned into a scowl, teeth bared. He rolled his eyes and shook his head.

“Maybe,” I panted, “you can tell me what I’m in for by having one of your—your children.”

He arched his brows, glancing down at his watch for a moment as I moved through the contraction. I noticed how his jaw was clenched, and how the tension in his muscles made the veins that roped around his arms stand out as he tried not to look at me, keeping his eyes on the watch. He was high-strung right now, and I wasn’t letting him help me. That was all he needed me to do.

“I’m sorry, Xander—”

“I know you’re in pain and you don’t want to be fussed over. I understand,” he said quickly, glancing at me beneath his lashes. “I don’t like to be coddled when I’m hurt, either.”

“You can sit next to me if you want—”

He moved so quickly I didn’t have time to finish speaking before he was sitting next to me, his hand hovering over my thigh. I nodded my head, and he let his hand rest on my skin, a sigh of relief leaving his lips.

My body relaxed as the contraction lessened, and I let out the breath I was holding.

“What do you want to know about me?” he asked softly, still looking down at his watch.

“Everything,” I replied, and he met my eye.

“There’s not much to say—”

“What were you like as a kid? Maybe I’ll know what I’m in for with Alexis.”

“Alexis won’t be like me,” he retorted, then shook his head. He sighed deeply, laying back against the grass. His fingers played over my lower back as I turned my head to look at him, noticing the melancholy behind his eyes.

“I was alone a lot when I was young. To be honest, I don’t have many memories from before... before Theo took me under his wing.”

“Your uncle, right?”

“Yes, my uncle. But as I grew he became more like a father figure, and Ciana—Soren’s daughter—she was like a mother. Their daughters are named Flora and Ava, and they’re like sisters to me, much younger

but it didn't matter. They were all I had. Theo made sure I was educated, and he made me his heir. I became the Alpha King at seventeen—"

"Seventeen?" I exclaimed. "Why—"

"Theo was ready to step down. I don't think it was a role he really wanted."

I exhaled through my nose, understanding that feeling exactly.

"Did you want to be the Alpha King?"

Xander was silent for a moment, watching clouds move overhead. He turned to me, giving me a weak smile.

"Yes, I did. I do, still. I'm good at it."

"So... what about chemistry—"

He chuckled, turning back to the clouds.

"There's one university in Egoren and it's faith based. I studied there for a time, but wasn't interested in theology or literature. I studied the sciences with a private tutor. I did get straight A's my entire year at Morhan, just so you know. I took it seriously—"

"Even though you were only there to find a White Queen to marry?"

He smirked, closing his eyes.

"I was successful, wasn't I?"

"Well, we're not married yet, so don't think you have it in the bag—"

He turned and glared, then smiled playfully as he shook his head.

"You Grays are impossible—hard headed and stubborn."

"It's genetic," I retorted, but whatever else I was going to say was ripped from my throat as I gasped, another contraction rocking me to my core. Xander sat up and leaned over me, his hand resting on my stomach as my belly tightened painfully.

"Why did—why did you not just—have you ever had another—girlfriend—"

"Lena," he growled, a glimmer of mirth in his eyes as he glanced from me to his watch. "We're not talking about this right now—"

"I want—to talk about it—ow! f**k!"

"I don't think I've ever heard you say f**k before," he snorted, his eyes on his watch.

I turned to him as I panted, reaching over and clutching his arm for support. This one hurt—bad.

"I'm not ready for this," I cried, my voice a weak, strained choke that I knew was barely audible.

"I don't believe that for a second," he said softly, brushing my hair out of my eyes. "You can still go to the hospital if you want. That's always an option."

I'd been planning on having Alexis at home with a midwife. That's how my mom had done it, in this very castle. I liked the idea of bringing our daughter into the world in the very place I'd been born and grew up.

But Mom had been in labor for two entire days before I'd been born. Two days! How the hell was I going to suffer like this for two days....

The contraction began to ease. Xander helped me into a seated position, rubbing my back.

"Do you want to walk some more? Did that seem to help?"

"It did," I said weakly, wiping a bead of sweat from my brow. "It did help."

He rose to his feet and helped me up, steadying me with a hand on my elbow. I shuffled forward a few paces and then felt... a pop... like a rubber band snapped somewhere deep in my belly. I looked up at Xander, furrowing my brow.

"What—"

Water burst from between my legs, soaking the dress I was wearing and my slippers. I looked down, momentarily numb from shock.

"Well, I think we should make our way back to the castle now," Xander said calmly, patting my back. I was starting to panic, but Xander was totally calm and collected, like this was just another day, another long walk in the woods. "Do you want me to carry you—"

"No," I said sharply, sniffing indignantly as I wiped frantic tears from my eyes. "I'm okay."

"It's not far—"

"I know!" I shrugged his hand off of me and waddled forward, wet and uncomfortable as he trailed behind me.

"Lena," he said, his voice dropping an octave as I turned around.

I blinked up at him, something mean and cutting on the tip of my tongue that I didn't mean threatening to spill out into the open just because I was petrified of what was going to happen next, and Xander was the only person nearby who I could target with my wrath.

"What—"

"I love you so much. You got this."

I burst into tears.