

Kings Breeder 941

[Chapter 941](#)

Jared

King Xander sent me an order to gather a team and clear out the Dark Forest.

I got Archer and Brandt together, along with many of my most trusted warriors, and we headed into the forest.

It was supposedly where Hestia's lair was, but all the searching we'd done in the forest before her death led to absolutely nothing.

Xander hoped that this time, it would be different. If nothing else, we could get rid of any lingering rogues or witches that were still hanging around, hopeful for Hestia's return.

The Dark Forest was crowded with old, thick trees that groaned in the wind.

My heart raced as I stepped onto the path. The air felt so close and heavy between the trees. I felt like there was a weight crushing down on me. The canopy was so dense that hardly any light got through, making the forest dark and eerie.

I had no idea what to expect within the forest. There was dark magic there, and rumors of terrifying beasts.

I could tell that my men were tense. Whenever the wind rustled dry leaves or a gnarled, twisted tree trunk groaned, they whipped around, brandishing their weapons.

Thick vines twisted around the tree trunks, making them look deformed, and some of them even looked like hunched-over people in the distance.

The shadows started playing tricks on us within seconds.

"Jared, there's a clearing up ahead," Archer spoke.

We all froze. His voice sounded so loud and harsh in the quiet, creepy forest.

"We'll start there, even if just to get a glimpse of sunlight. It might take the edge off." I nodded and took the lead, heading down the path to the clearing.

If I thought my mind would ease from entering the clearing, I was sorely mistaken....

Rising up from the center of the clearing was a tall, dark tower that blocked out the sun. It was a single spire, rising up into the sky, made of black stone. There was one door and no windows that I could see.

I tilted my head back and could barely see the top of the tower in the glare of the sun.

"This wasn't here before," I murmured, feeling my brows furrow.

What horrors were hidden in this tower?

"This must be Hestia's lair," Archer suggested.

I nodded and walked up the steps to the door. I knocked, and a loud echo rippled through the inside of the tower.

"It's possible that Hestia cloaked it with her magic, so we couldn't see it before."

"Killing her broke the spell," Archer continued.

"Everyone, on guard. This tower could be booby-trapped. Expect anything!" I ordered.

The men quickly took up a perimeter around the tower and stood at the ready.

"If her cloaking magic is gone, any protection spells she cast might be too," Archer pointed out.

"I'm not taking any chances. It doesn't take magic to put in booby traps and protect a secret lair."

I reached for the doorknob but Archer stopped me.

"Let me."

He pushed me back and opened the door. I held my breath, waiting for some strange trap to trigger. I was ready to pull Archer out of the way in a second if I had to.

The door creaked open, loudly, sending another echoing sound through the entire tower.

Archer took a step back and held the hilt of his sword.

We waited until the echoing stopped. Nothing jumped out at us.

"It seems safe," Archer murmured.

"Alright, you come with me." I pointed to several guards. "The rest of you stay on guard."

Archer, Brandt, and I went into the tower with several other warriors at our backs.

"Spread out and look around but keep quiet and keep alert. Don't touch anything. If you find something of interest, let me know and I'll come inspect it."

They nodded and spread out.

I headed to the left where the main entryway opened up into another room.

From what I could tell, there were a few rooms on the first floor and then a spiral staircase that went all the way up through the tower. It must have led to other floors higher up.

I wanted to secure the first floor first before we explored deeper.

"Alpha, in here!" Brandt called to me.

I followed his voice to another chamber. It was lit up with luminous stones, casting a dim light around the room.

In the center of the room was a mound of moonstones. They shimmered in the dim light... so many moonstones of all shapes and sizes and quality.

"I've never seen so many moonstones," Brandt muttered.

I looked around the room and found an old grimoire splayed open on a table.

"We should collect these moonstones and bring them back to the capital," I suggested as I picked up the grimoire.

While my men packed up the moonstones, I flipped through the ancient pages. Most of it was written in another language. I recognized a few words that indicated this book held all the dark secrets of Hestia and Lycaon. Xander might have scholars that could translate it.

There was one section of the book that I didn't need to translate.

It was an extensive family tree of Hestia's bloodline, showing her long lineage of dark witches.

When I came across the latest entries in the family tree, I froze.

"Archer... Hestia wasn't alone here in her lair."

"What do you mean?"

Suddenly, a loud wail filled the air.

A shiver ran down my spine and I nearly dropped the book. The cry echoed through the tower, a blood curdling scream. It tapered off into a soft sob and then went silent.

I knew that kind of cry.

"Through there." I nodded to a cobweb-covered tapestry on the wall. "There's something behind that tapestry."

Archer and I tore the tapestry down, revealing a hidden room behind it.

Inside, there were two small beds. A boy and a girl, no more than five and six years old, were wrapped in tattered blankets in their beds....

My eyes widened and I nearly forgot about the grimoire in my hands. The children had wide, terrified eyes, their skin pale and sickly. They didn't look well, but they were alive.

"Who are they?" Archer asked.

I looked at the grimoire again. "They're Hestia's children. Orion and Eva.

"We need to get them out of here." I snapped to two of my men.

They scooped the children up and brought them outside into the sunlight.

"Archer, stay here with the men and finish getting all this packed up. I want it shipped to the palace. Stay alert and let me know of anything suspicious you find," I ordered as I followed the children outside.

"Of course. I'll meet you back at the palace."

I nodded and made arrangements to get the children back to the castle with Eliza's help.

They needed to be seen by a healer and nursed back to health. Or... their danger levels needed to be assessed.

As we traveled back to the castle with the children, a new sense of unease settled over me.

What was going to happen to these children?

As a father, my first instinct was to protect them and get the proper care. But was that the right thing to do? Were they dangerous? What kind of dark powers did they have? Did Hestia pass her darkness to them?

Whatever the case, these children had to be treated with caution.

"They are still innocent children! Is it right for us to condemn them for what they might do? Should we punish them because of who their mother was?" I spoke about my worries to Eliza.

"Xander and Lena will do the right thing," she assured me.

I barely had a chance to think of who their father might be before we arrived at the castle.

I sent the children to the infirmary and met with Xander.

"Did you really bring Hestia's children back to my palace?" He glared at me.

Well, word traveled fast.

"They're just innocent children and they've been on their own for a while. They needed to be cared for," I argued.

Xander sighed heavily and nodded. "You are right. I will have them moved to a protected area of the castle, away from anyone else. I don't want to find out the hard way that they are dangerous."

"I agree. But we need to think about what to do with them."

Xander nodded.

We met up in the war room with Lena and Eliza. Hestia's children were a potential problem that all of us had to deal with.

"I understand your concerns, Xander, but we can't just leave them locked up in a room their whole lives. They are children and deserve a full life," Eliza voiced her thoughts.

I slipped my arm around her shoulders. "I agree. They deserve a chance, especially given who their mother is."

"I'm thinking about who their mother is. We can't risk them running loose and causing problems like Hestia." Xander sighed and sat down heavily.

I knew he didn't like the thought of imprisoning children, but he was the king of the Dark Realm and had to make those hard decisions for the safety of everyone.

I didn't envy him.

"They are the children of a powerful, dark witch, not some orphans found on the side of the road," the king pointed out. "We can't underestimate their potential danger."

Eliza opened her mouth to argue, and I was ready to defend her, but Lena stepped in.

"I don't think any of us want to see these children imprisoned or judged for their mother's actions," she said. "But we can't let them run around unsupervised. However, we have a lot of powerful witches that could train them to use their magic, and to use it for good."

"You want to teach them to be in control of their gifts?" Xander arched an eyebrow and gave his wife a look.

"Yes. If they can learn to control their powers and see the good they can be used for, and if we give them a chance, then they might not fall prey to the darkness that Hestia was consumed by. They could become allies and assets," she elaborated.

"I think Lena is right. If we treat them kindly and give them a good life, they might never turn to their mother's ways."

"That's a big 'if,'" Xander growled.

"Well, it will also mean that our witches will know far more about their power than we did Hestia's. If they do become a threat, they'll be easier to take out," I chimed in.

Xander stroked his chin and nodded. "Alright, I have some witches that could take on their education."

"They're not going to be safe in the Dark Realm," Eliza spoke up.

Lena nodded. "I know where to take them."

"What about the moonstones and all the other artifacts we uncovered?" I questioned.

Xander and Lena exchanged a look.

"Follow me." Xander led us to a hidden door in the war room. There was a chamber underneath filled with artifacts. Some I recognized from Aries' vault. It was the perfect, safest, place to hide potentially dangerous artifacts.

As we looked around the room, I couldn't help but feel a sense of relief wash over me. The children were going to be taken care of and the dangerous artifacts were going to be hidden away. It felt like a small victory amidst the chaos we had been facing.

"Well, I guess that settles it then. We'll give the children a chance and ensure that they are trained in using their powers for good," Lena said, breaking the silence.

I nodded in agreement, happy that we had come to a conclusion that was fair to everyone involved. We all had a lot of work ahead of us, but with the right training and education, these children might just become powerful allies.

"Thank you all for your help and hard work clearing out the Dark Forest," Xander said, breaking the silence. "We will make sure that the children are taken care of and that they receive the best training possible."

I looked at Eliza and she smiled, nodding to show her peace and agreement with these decisions before stretching a hand out to me. I took her hand.

We followed Xander and Lena from the vault. When the locks were snapped and bolted into place, the last of my doubts left me.

"Feel better?" Eliza asked after hearing my sigh of relief.

"I do," I admitted pulling her into me and kissing her cheek.

[Chapter 942](#)

Mila

Over the years, Jared and Eliza worked hard to provide all the best for their pack, Midnight Sun. They called on me a lot to provide aid with anything magic or medicine related.

I was used to that by now.

There were always reasons to drop by Midnight Sun, even if just to check on things.

Lately, I'd been having these visions about particular members of Midnight Sun that had been on my mind lately.

I didn't plan to interfere, I just wanted to check on things and make sure....

"Miss Mila, I have a message for you from Luna Eliza from Midnight Sun," the messenger ran into my quarters and waved the letter around.

"Alright, let me see it," I held my hand out.

I ripped the seal and pulled the letter out. It was a request for herbs for the pack's new healing center.

I smiled and folded the letter back up. My own apothecary had stores of all kinds of herbs from the Dark and Light Realm.

I kept myself well stocked and had plenty to spare.

"I want you to bring a message back to Luna Eliza and let her know that I will be there in a few days and bring the herbs she's requested."

The messenger bowed his head and left again.

The most recent vision I had from a member of Midnight Sun was one that I felt I needed to check on.

For years, I'd been getting these visions and thinking of ways to subvert them. After Eliza was nearly killed in the Stone Circle, despite my warning, I knew it was better now not to share the visions.

Like my Aunt Helen used to tell me, interfering was never the answer. No matter how roundabout or vague I tried to make it.

That didn't mean I couldn't be there to help out when I was needed.

"Thank you, thank you, Mila," Eliza gushed excitedly, bouncing on the balls of her feet while I handed over the herb supplies.

"I see you've gotten the medical facility up and running." I took a look around at the small space.

It was a two-room office with a lobby and waiting room. The space was functional for a small pack.

"It's getting there. I wish we had a bigger space, but this will work for now. The second floor has a few rooms that I'd like to transform into operating rooms."

"It is a good start. You're going to need more herbs and someone who can make healing salves, and healing remedies," I reminded her.

"I know," Eliza sighed. "We have a few healers, but none as competent as you."

I smiled and placed my hand over hers. "There are few who are. But I know a few talented healers that I can suggest for you."

Eliza perked up and smiled brightly. "Could you? That would be great!"

"I can also provide you with a map that has markers for where you'll be able to gather some of the most common, and rarer, herbs you'll be needing," I offered.

Eliza nodded. "You're a true life saver! Will you be staying for a few days?"

I shook my head. "I can't. But I do have some business to take care of while I'm in town."

Eliza was busy with organizing the herbs, so I showed myself to the pack mansion. On my way, I ran into Scarlett.

"Oh, Scarlett, you're just who I was looking for." I stopped her in her tracks.

She creased her brow and gave me a look I was all too familiar with. I'd known that look for years....

I smiled and shook my head. Instinctively, I wrapped my arms around her and hugged her. She stiffened for a moment and then hugged me back briefly.

"I'm sorry, but you remind me of someone." I squeezed her shoulders before pulling back. "It's good to see you, Scarlett." I nodded and walked by her.

"Wait! Why do you always look at me like I'm a long-lost friend? Who do I remind you of?" she reached for me and dropped her arm when I turned back.

I thought back to my old friend. She'd been there for me in times when I didn't have anyone else.

"I had a friend who has a similar life story to yours. She looked like you too. In fact... I'm starting to think you're a reincarnation of her."

Scarlett creased her brow and her eyes shone with confusion. "Reincarnation? That's not possible, is it?"

I chuckled and shook my head. "I used to think the same thing. I've been around a long time, but there are many things that I've seen that I can't explain."

"You mean, because you have magic?" Scarlett tilted her head slightly, curiously.

"I also have visions. Sometimes I see some pretty unbelievable things." I tapped the side of my head.

"And you've had visions of me?" She looked nervous suddenly.

"Well... I've had visions. And now, I'm willing to accept that there is more going on here than I previously thought, such as reincarnation. There are things that I will probably never comprehend."

"I guess there's a lot in this world that I will never understand," Scarlett agreed.

I smiled and took both of Scarlett's hands in mine. I squeezed them gently and smiled warmly at her.

"I truly believe that you're a reincarnation of someone I knew a long time ago."

Scarlett chewed her lower lip and kept her hands in mine.

"Can we... talk about it?" she asked, her eyes growing wider.

"Sure, let's go inside."

Scarlett and I went into the pack mansion and grabbed some coffee from the kitchen. We headed into the garden and sat at a picnic table.

Gardeners wandered around trimming hedges and watering flowers. We sat under an umbrella with the warm sun coming down.

I waited for Scarlett to open the conversation. This was a difficult topic to broach with anyone, finding out they had another life that they didn't know about. I knew it wasn't easy to come to terms with and I wanted to give Scarlett the time she needed.

For the sake of our past friendship.

"Who was she? And how do you know it's me?" Scarlett asked finally.

"Well, for starters, you have the same fiery spirit that she had. Whenever I look into your eyes, I see her staring back."

Scarlett pursed her lips. "Could I be a relative of hers?"

I sighed and shook my head. "I don't think so. See, her name was Scarlett, too. And it is her spirit, her essence that I see when I look at you. The two of you have also led similar lives."

"What do you mean by that?" Scarlett looked down into her coffee cup.

I smiled to myself, thinking of the first night I'd met Scarlett, my old friend Scarlett. I'd gone to a party at her high-end brothel and she'd given me some good advice about Soren. It was a long time ago, but I still remembered how she managed to make me feel like I was so special and beautiful.

She always had the best advice and guidance for me.

From what I understood, this Scarlett offered the same for Eliza.

"The Scarlett I knew was separated from her son and her son's father for a long time. They... it took Lee many years to track him down and when they did, it took time to mend the relationship between them all. Unfortunately for her, it took almost her entire life to be reunited with her son."

I paused and sipped my coffee.

"I've heard that you are more fortunate and didn't need to spend that much time waiting to be reunited."

Scarlett nodded. She still had her eyes cast down and she looked a little pale.

I knew it couldn't be easy to hear about a life previously lived, especially when there were so many similarities.

"That's really sad. I am sorry your friend had to go through that. I can't imagine..." she trailed off and blinked several times.

I saw a few tears pool at the edges of her eyes.

"Don't be sorry. My friend continued to live life to the fullest and she never gave up hope, no matter how desperate it seemed."

"She sounds... wonderful."

I reached across the table and took Scarlett's hand. "You are wonderful, too."

Scarlett was quiet for a long moment.

I glanced around at the garden. It was so bright and vibrant. I knew that Eliza paid special attention to the garden, but the entire village had come a long way.

The school had several classes now and they finally had a medical facility.

I was pleased to see that Eliza and Jared had made all their dreams come true. It made me wish that my friend Scarlett hadn't had to wait so long to realize her own dreams. But it reinforced my thought that this Scarlett was her reincarnation.

It was another chance to right the wrongs from the past.

Thinking of that reminded me of my visions, and I took a quick sip of coffee to hide my frown.

"It's all so amazing... I never thought about reincarnation before. The idea is a bit hard to get my head around."

"That's understandable. If I didn't have my visions and my magic, there are a lot of things I'd never be able to wrap my mind around," I admitted with a nod.

"I guess, it is comforting to know that I lived life to the fullest before. Maybe that means I will continue to live life to the fullest going forward," she said, smiling brightly.

"I hope you know that you are your own person. There are similarities in your lives, but you don't need to live your life based on a past life," I reminded her.

She gave me a little, mischievous grin. "It is a little comforting in a way, to know I've lived before. Maybe that means I will live again in the future."

I smiled steadily and nodded as I sipped my coffee and stared around her at the gardener working behind her.

I didn't want to alarm Scarlett, but there was a part of me that wanted to tell her everything I'd seen, all the possible futures that could happen to her and her family.

Swallowing hard, I sipped my coffee again. I decided I couldn't tell her because telling her could just make things worse, or it could start the chain of events that led to those outcomes.

"Mila, are you alright?" Scarlett asked.

"Oh, yes. I'm just thinking about reincarnation and the pros and cons," I said, shrugging.

"Cons?"

I shook my head. "Nothing you need to worry about."

I finished my coffee, thinking that Scarlett's soul would have to be even stronger for what was to come.

Chapter 943: Restoring the Mate Bond... Maybe?

Eliza

"Mommy, Mommy, wake up!"

I opened my eyes to see four young girls bouncing on the bed excitedly cheering for me.

"Good morning, good morning," I laughed, hugging my four youngest daughters.

They were so excited and giddy.

"What has the four of you so excited?" I asked.

"It's a very special day today!" my youngest said.

I arched an eyebrow. "Really, why is that?"

"Mommy! You know! You didn't forget, did you?"

"It's your birthday! And Daddy's birthday, remember?"

"Oh, that's right," I said, teasingly.

The girls laughed and I hugged them again. I loved my family so much.

"Guys, leave Mom alone. It's her birthday and she needs her space to enjoy this." Eloise walked in with a tray of a home cooked breakfast.

My younger daughters sat aside and let my sixteen year old put the tray on my lap.

"Did you make this, Eloise?" I asked.

She nodded. "I did. The little ones helped... some."

I smiled at each of them. "Thank you, guys. This is absolutely lovely."

There was a little vase with a flower from the garden on the tray and pancakes, eggs, and bacon. It was really the royal treatment.

"Mom, where is Daddy today? He wasn't here when we woke up," Eloise said.

"He had to run an errand," My voice muffled around a bite of pancake.

"Is he going to be back for his birthday?" Her eyes widened nervously.

"Of course! We have a special party planned to celebrate. He's on an errand with Archer, and neither of them will miss the party if they can help it," I assured.

My younger girls started picking at the food on my plate, too. I let them, just happy to enjoy my time with them.

"Thank you, my darlings. This is all so delicious."

The girls beamed and rolled around on the bed. They watched me closely, each bite I took. They were so full of pride at the breakfast they'd made. I just loved seeing how happy they were.

I closed my eyes and let the sweet flavor of syrup soaked pancakes fill my mouth and my senses. This was the happiest birthday moment I could imagine, except for the fact that Jared was missing.

I sighed and took another bite of pancakes. I knew that whatever Jared was up to, it was important.

Knock. Knock.

My heart skipped and looked to the door, hoping that Jared had made it back already. I wasn't expecting him back for a few hours.

Eloise went to the door and opened it. It wasn't Jared. Just a delivery messenger. He had a package.

"I have a delivery from your mother," he announced, putting the package on the table.

"Thank you."

As soon as the messenger left, all my girls looked at me excitedly. Eloise picked up the package and brought it to me.

"Can you open it? Please!" she begged, setting the package in my lap.

"Right now?"

"Yeah! Gifts from the Light Realm are always so much more fun!" my youngest cheered.

"Alright."

Slowly, I peeled the paper back, all of my girls staring on with curiosity. I made sure to slowly peel back one layer at a time, just to raise their anticipation.

Finally, I opened the box and found a film camera inside.

"Look at this. It's a camera and film. There are even the chemicals and instructions to develop the film and make really great pictures," I said, pulling the camera out.

Eloise's eyes lit up and she grabbed the camera. "This is perfect! I can take pictures of you and Dad at the party."

She stood up and pointed the camera at us, snapping a few pictures of me and the younger girls on the bed.

I smiled and shook my head.

"Sure. But you'll need to find a place to make a dark room so you can develop the film," I told her. "Help me finish breakfast and then we can find a place for it."

Eloise and my younger daughters and I walked around the mansion looking for a good dark room.

"A closet would be a good place because there aren't any windows," I suggested.

"Mmm, that might be too small," Eloise said as she looked at the list of instructions. "What about the attic? I think there's only one window, and it should be easy enough to cover it."

"Alright, let's check it out." I nodded to the attic stairs.

When we got to the attic, I could see that Eloise was set on the attic.

"This is perfect! I can hang the drying lines here, and put the development trays over there. I just need to do a little dusting," Eloise said, pointing from one side to the next.

"You can set up a dark room here, Eloise. We'll get some of the pack members to help. But once it's set up, you need to maintain it and do all the work yourself. I don't want you bossing your sisters around," I told her.

"That's fine. I'd rather do it on my own." Eloise waved me off. She was already consumed by her dark room plans.

While she worked on her dark room project, I went back to the bedroom and pulled out a special gift for Jared. I placed it on the table in our room.

Just then, Jared entered the bedroom. He paused when he saw me.

Jared was covered with dust and looked a little tired from his travels. Smiling at me, he set a second package on the table.

"Promise me, you'll open it last." He winked.

"Only if you promise to open mine last," I said back.

Jared cupped my cheek and nodded. "I've got to get cleaned up for the party."

I headed down to the party, which was in the garden behind the mansion. The flowers were in full bloom and everyone from the pack was there. So were a bunch of our friends from around the Dark Realm.

"Happy birthday, Eliza." Scarlett took my hands and kissed my cheek. "I'm so happy Gage got time off from college to be here for the party."

She nodded to her son, who was playing with his younger siblings on the lawn.

"I'm glad he did too. Thank you for being here, Scarlett." I squeezed her hands.

"There she is, the woman of the hour!" Abe came over and clapped me on the back. I grunted and shook my head.

"Thanks. I'm glad you could make it. How is the family?"

Abe smirked and nodded to Brandt. They'd officially gotten married several years ago and adopted some kids that were made orphans after Aries's attack on the capital.

"Great! Thank you for inviting all of us."

I smiled and shook my head. "You, Brandt, and the kids are like family."

I mingled around the garden, even after Jared came down. Side by side, we greeted our guests and I watched the gifts piling up on the gift table.

Eloise popped around the garden, snapping pictures of everyone. She was so happy with the camera and I enjoyed seeing the big smile on her face. I couldn't wait to see how the pictures came out.

"Hello everyone!" Giselle stood up on a picnic table and clapped her hands, getting everyone's attention.

"I didn't know people were making speeches," I grunted, leaning against Jared.

"Come on, Eliza, just enjoy the day. It is our day, after all." He kissed the top of my head.

"We're going to bring the cake out in a moment. So, I want everyone to start singing as loud as they can," Giselle said, bouncing on the balls of her feet. "One. Two. Three."

"Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you. Happy birthday, Eliza and Jared. Happy birthday to you!"

My heart swelled as everyone sang to us and my cheeks burned. Everyone in the garden circled around me and Jared, making us the center of attention.

Miriam brought a cake out from the kitchen. It was definitely one she'd made herself, a three-layer cake that was carefully frosted and decorated.

She set it on the picnic table just as the singing wrapped up.

"Blow out the candles, Mommy!" one of my daughters shouted.

"There are a lot of candles on that cake," I said.

Forty-one, to be exact.

"I think we'll need some help. Do you girls want to help?" I asked.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah!" they all cheered together.

I smiled and ushered them closer to the picnic table.

"On the count of three, girls," Jared announced. "One. Two. Three!"

We all took a big breath and blew out the candles. Everyone in the garden clapped and cheered.

Miriam started slicing up the cake and handed out plates to my daughters first. I stepped back, watching them happily devour the cake.

Eloise came up behind us and started snapping more pictures of us.

"I can't wait to see your pictures, my dear," I told her.

"I'll put a whole birthday album together. That's my present for you, okay?" she said, snapping another picture of me.

I nodded.

She went off and took some more pictures. I watched as she pulled Gage aside and took a picture of him, too. It was a lot more personal than the other pictures she took of the party guests, and I couldn't help but wonder if there was something blossoming between them.

"Okay, we need to get a group photo," Eloise announced. "Mom, Dad, think you can hold my sisters still long enough?"

"I'm on it," Jared said.

We all got together as a group and Eloise took the shot.

"Wait, we need you in the picture, too," I pointed out.

Eloise smiled and handed the camera over to Gage. "Think you could get a picture of the whole family?"

"Of course." He gave her a gentle smile as he took the camera.

I caught the slight blush on Eloise's cheeks as she joined us for a big family picture.

By the end of the night, I was so exhausted, but happy.

Jared and I made our way back to our bedroom. There, we saw the two remaining presents we hadn't opened yet.

"Oh, we still have presents to open," I pointed out.

Jared smirked. He handed me the box he'd brought back from his mission with Archer.

I handed over my box too.

"Should we open them at the same time?" I asked, giggling.

Jared nodded. Together, we opened our packages and as soon as I saw what he gave me, I started laughing.

I held up the box with a fresh Luna Lilly bloom in it.

Jared laughed too, showing me what I gave him. It was another fresh Luna Lilly flower.

"Oh... we know each other too well, don't we?" Jared teased. He brushed my nose with the flower I gave him.

I shied away from the tickling petals.

"Well, now we have one to use and one to preserve... just in case we need it again." Jared winked at me. I sighed and shook my head.

A few weeks later, Eloise presented us with her photo album. Jared and I poured over it, looking at all the amazing pictures she'd taken. They were so lovely.

As we flipped through each page, I couldn't help but feel grateful for the life we had built. We had a beautiful family, amazing friends, and each other. It was everything I had ever wanted.

Jared wrapped his arm around me and pulled me closer. "These pictures are amazing, Eliza. Thank you, Eloise."

Eloise beamed, clearly happy with the reaction to her present. "I'm so glad you like it, Mom and Dad. I put a lot of work into it."

"You can tell," I said, smiling at her. "They're perfect."

"Thank you so much, Eloise. We are going to treasure this forever," Jared told her

We continued looking through the pictures, reliving the memories of the party and the moments leading up to it. Jared and I even found a few pictures of ourselves that we didn't remember taking.

As we reached the end of the album, Jared leaned in and kissed me. "I love you, Eliza."

"I love you too, Jared," I replied, snuggling closer to him.

Chapter 944: Wounded

Sasha

The last heat of summer curled the edges of the leaves that blew across the street from trees strategically planted by the city along the sidewalk. Amanda had to hold down her skirt as we clicked high heels on pavement to the bar.

I didn't have that trouble. My skirt was form-fitting, clinging securely to my slight curves.

Nostalgia's door swung in easily in the breeze, and the smell of fruity drinks and peanut shells wafted over us.

So did the noise of about sixty standing and sitting patrons. The place was packed, literally and figuratively.

"Let's split up," Amanda said, her sharp green eyes picking out places people might be vacating soon.

"Split up? How will we even find each other in this—"

Amanda grabbed my shoulder then and hauled me toward a pair of emptying barstools. We skidded into them just as another pair of girls was about to.

"Sorry," Amanda said, unrepentantly.

The girls scowled. So far, we weren't making any new friends.

Amanda turned her head sharply, already erasing them from her world. "I can't believe we're starting up again soon," she groaned, referring to the fact the first semester after summer break was looming over us.

"I'm excited," I admitted. "Hopefully, I was assigned to the new library build in the North for my work-study."

With a flick of her wrist and a flirtatious smile, Amanda called the waiter over. "Two Bite of the Wolfs," she smiled.

"Two—is one of them for me?" I asked.

"Yeah. It's a little early in the night to get completely blotto, don't you think?" Amanda winked.

Considering six men had been licking salt off her hand between shots the last time we went out, it seemed wise, uncommonly wise for Amanda.

"Why do you go to college if you hate it?" I asked. "Are you struggling or something?"

Amanda shook her head, distracted by a passing tight backside. "I'm in the top three."

Moon Goddess. "The top three?! What the hell are you complaining about, then?!" I gaped.

"It's bo-oring," Amanda complained.

"For you, maybe," I huffed.

Amanda finished ogling the passing guy, who'd thrown her a wink for her trouble. She reached across the table and patted my hand. "I know, I know—eye on the prize, Miss No Social Life. You're going to be an engineer, and not just any engineer, a Royal Engineer."

"Yeah, if I get this work-study," I sighed.

Amanda snorted in a rather unladylike manner as the waiter returned and set down our drinks. She took a long sip of hers before continuing, "Sasha, honey, you work hard enough to power three cities. You hardly sleep, we almost never go out—even though it's summer—and you've got the White Queen herself in your corner. Not to mention you're actually talented... you're getting this work-study."

"Hmm," I said, pushing my hair behind my ear. "I hope s—"

The crowd parted, and in the mirror over the bar, I saw a face I'd never forget.

His steel-gray eyes, encased in dark lashes and hooded beneath his dark brows just caught the low lights of the bar. His brown hair was cropped short on the sides and left just curly enough to be wild on top.

He was bigger than I remembered, built tall and muscular, but I would know that face anywhere. His complexion was deeply tanned over his wide jaw and high cheekbones, hinting at a summer he must have finished enjoying in the sun.

Lucas. f*****g. Black.

His eyes suddenly met mine in the mirror and his playboy smile brightened. I could feel the charm rolling off him as he approached us, much to my dismay.

"Ooo," Amanda said, catching the same figure in the mirror and not-so-subtly fanning herself. "Yum-alicious at your six."

Holding his gaze in the mirror, I could see that he was indeed coming our way, as several girls nearby began to crowd the space around us to get his attention.

My jaw tightened. "Yeah, I guess... snake."

Amanda's eyebrows shot up. "What, me or him?"

"Him." I took a fortifying gulp of my Bite of the Wolf and deliberately dropped my gaze away from the mirror as he got closer, trying not to catch his eyes again.

Lucas Black either didn't take the hint or didn't care. He did whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted, like it was his personal privilege to do so—typical.

"Hi there, beautiful," Lucas said.

I peeped an eye up at him, but he was talking to Amanda and not me. That boiled my blood even more.

Amanda fluttered her eyelashes at him and extended a hand, not to shake but to kiss. "Hey, handsome."

Lucas played along and kissed the back of her hand with a gallant bow.

For some reason, I wanted to growl. I didn't even have my wolf yet, and I still wanted to growl. This asshole making nice with my best friend was enough to make me sick.

He chatted with the other girls as well, making an obvious effort to ignore me.

The girls were eating out of his hands, taken in by his good looks and charming ways. His spell was like drawing moths to a flame.

They didn't know him like I did though.

Finally, he turned his steel-gray eyes my way.

"Sasha...." At least he remembered my name, but why did he make it sound warm and gentle, sending an unexpected shiver through me? I tried my best to fight the effect he was having on me.

He was the same jerk he'd always been, and I had to remember that.

"How have you been?" he asked.

"Excuse me...." I said, feeling ill. I shoved myself off my barstool and made a beeline for the bathroom to avoid having to make any real pleasantries.

If I timed it right, I could splash my face, give him time to chat up and move along with a more willing female who didn't know what a jerk he was, and return to the bar, avoiding any further contact with him altogether.

The least I could do was spare myself this disgusting display of false chivalry from that—

I bounced off a large beer gut and stumbled back, startled. The way to the bathroom had been completely clear a moment ago.

"Excuse me, sir," I said as I sidestepped him.

Or tried to, at least—Beer Gut moved into my path again, this time putting a hand low on my bare shoulder. The heel of his palm was almost indecently low on my chest.

"What's the rush, pretty pup? I thought maybe you and I could talk a while."

He spoke to my pushed-up bodice, not my face.

Creepy crawlies of disgust crept over my skin. "Um," I said, firmly pushing his hand off me, "maybe some other time."

"Aww, don't be like that, babe," Beer Gut whined, gripping my arm before I could get away. Beer slouched over the top of his frosted mug. He was drunk—just one more point in his favor.

"Let me go," I said sharply, trying to twist my arm out of his grip.

He started backing me toward the hall between the bathrooms, to the dark corner next to an "Employees Only" door at the end. "I promise, once you go Jack, you never go back."

Sweet mercies of the White Queen... I twisted my arm again, but his grip didn't let up.

He slipped an unwelcome arm around me, his oily skin and dank smell of sweat hitting my nose and stomach unpleasantly. I tried to pull away and he gripped me tighter, pressing my body into his.

He laughed, and the creepy jiggle of his body against mine made my skin crawl. I fought against his hold but he wouldn't let me go.

Just as I was preparing to knee the drunkard in the balls, his grip on me vanished.

A squeal hit my ears before I actually saw what was going on. Between me and him stood a towering figure of a man whose wolf was so close to the surface I could hear the crackle of his bones preparing to make the shift as he growled, low and guttural, in warning.

He was towering tall, with a muscular back and powerful arms, holding Beer Gut by the back of his neck and then slamming him mercilessly to the floor.

The guy on the ground didn't need any prompting as he scrambled to his feet and vanished into the crowd. The man who'd knocked him back turned to me. If I had gained any breath after being released from that unwelcomed embrace, all of it expelled from my lungs again as I came face to face with my savior.

Lucas. f*****g. Black.

In the next instant and without a thought in my head, my arm flew out from my side. As if it had a mind of its own, my hand connected with his cheek. I felt the sting in my own hand before I even realized that I slapped him clear across his face.

I held my breath, waiting for the return of the low growl and crackling bones, but he merely lifted an eyebrow and looked at me curiously.

"I think you meant to say, 'Thank you.'"

My hand still stung as he gave me an infuriating grin. I wondered if he'd even felt the slap at all.

"Thank you for ruining my night out," I said.

His other eyebrow shot up on his forehead and his grin widened into a smile.

"Come on, don't be like that," Lucas said softly, reaching out to tuck a wayward strand of hair behind my ear. I couldn't move... I couldn't even breathe. The heat from his body poured off of him in waves, carrying his scent of warm citrus and rosewood. "How have you been?"

I gritted my teeth and kept it together.

"I've been fine," I said, "but am not up for a stroll down memory lane right now. I have a lot on my mind. Excuse me." I pushed past him.

Forgetting the ladies' room, I simply left the bar.

I imagined my hand still stinging as I crossed the campus quad, heading for the engineering department. I'd felt smug to begin with, but now, in hindsight, I felt a bit bad about it. He did come to my rescue, after all.

Dry leaves crunched under my feet as I left the quad and mounted the stairs to my major's building. It had been home for three years now, and this would be my fourth. This work-study would be paramount in determining my future after graduation.

I pushed my hair behind my ear as I walked down the silent halls to my advisor's office. I hadn't slept a wink, and I was telling myself it was the stress of not knowing about my work-study and not the slap. Nope, not the slap—it was definitely not the slap.

Professor Augustine's door was closed, and since I was raised to be polite, I knocked even though I had an appointment.

"Come in, Miss Wentley," my advisor said.

My palms were sweating a little as I turned the knob and stepped into Professor Augustine's office. "You wanted to meet with me, ma'am?" I asked.

"Yes, yes, Miss Wentley. Please, sit down," Professor Augustine said, gesturing to the chair across the desk from her.

I settled bonelessly into the chair.

Professor Augustine pulled an envelope with the royal seal stamped on it in wax. The royals liked to do some things the old-fashioned way. I sat up straighter.

"I haven't opened it yet," Professor Augustine said. "I thought you deserved to know the news at the same time I did."

Given it was such a small envelope, I felt myself deflate. Much like a college acceptance, if it was a letter and not a packet, it was likely a rejection.

"Now, remember, no matter what it says, you are still the most talented and hardworking student in this department," Professor Augustine prefaced before sliding a letter opener under the seal.

I braced myself. I knew the rejection would be crushing, but I wanted to be professional at least in front of my advising professor.

Professor Augustine flicked her eyes over the letter, then gave me a wide smile over the top of the single sheet of paper. "Congratulations. You got it!"

I'd held my breath so long I thought I might pass out when the words left her mouth. "Really?" I wheezed.

"Truly. But I thought you must have been accepted to the new northern library project when I saw this." Professor Augustine's eyes twinkled as she pulled a large packet from her desk and handed it to me. This one was also sporting the royal seal.

Tears stung my eyes, but I tapped into my Wentley stoicism and didn't let them fall. "This is... this is so... so..."

"Great? Wonderful?" Professor Augustine supplied with a wide smile. "Well, it was certainly to be expected and it is well-deserved." She handed the packet across the desk to me. This one was addressed to me and me alone.

Still, the professor had been kind enough to wait for me to open her letter, so I figured I could do her the same courtesy. I opened the packet with all the details of the project, from its current building status to how to get to the library to....

I blinked, then stared, then blinked again.

"Is something wrong, Ms. Wentley?" Professor Augustine asked, her face pinched with concern.

Yes....

"No," I responded quickly, "no problem at all. Thank you so much, professor."

Professor Augustine smiled again. "You go run along and tell all your friends. I am extremely proud of you. I know you will do well."

I nodded and rose, hugging the packet to my chest to keep my hands from shaking. "Thank you," I said again before heading out.

My heart pounded as I walked down the hall, then out the doors, then down the stone steps, across the sidewalk, and back to the quad. I sank down in the grass, pulled the papers away from my chest, and scanned the page again, but the words, unfortunately, didn't change.

Under "Project Manager and Head Engineer" appeared a name I'd hoped never to deal with again.

Lucas. f*****g. Black.

Chapter 945: Rejected

Lucas

A pothole almost unseated me as my chauffeur, Ian, navigated us back toward my mansion on a hill from our stop at the post office.

"Ian, a little slower, please?" I said with a wince, pretty sure that last one was going to bruise my ass.

Not that it would be the only bruise on my body. I reached up and touched my cheek once more.

Sasha f*****g Wentley.

She packed a lot more of a punch now than I remembered her having as a kid, but she was still as feisty as ever.

A smile tugged at my lips, but I quickly covered it with a cough as Ian peered at me in the rearview mirror.

Mirrors were going to be the death of me.

When I'd snagged her deep, navy eyes at Nostalgia, I could hardly believe I was seeing her again after all this time. Sure, she'd become curvier in some places, places I couldn't help but notice as I approached her and her friend at the bar. With a tight skirt and a push-up bodice that was completely strapless, showing off miles and miles of fair skin, it was impossible not to notice. I was a red-blooded Lycaon male, after all.

She iced me out immediately, which was disappointing, but I guess at my twenty-seven to her twenty, I'd had more time to get over the past—seven years, to be exact.

I really should have found a new direction, and a different tight-dressed target, when her eyes telegraphed "f**k off" at me in that mirror. But her lavender scent was too tempting, too intoxicating to be ignored.

A whiff or two would be fine, I'd decided. I'd even contented myself with ignoring her, as she'd wanted, and talking with her friend. I could still breathe her in.

Sasha thwarted my carefully laid plan when she stood to go to the ladies' room, however. I'd gotten a few lungfuls of that sweet lavender, but not nearly enough when she slid off her barstool and stomped away.

And then that asshole....

That asshole—he dared touch what was....

I didn't finish that sentence in my mind. I didn't want to suspect something that was truly unbelievable and very, very poorly timed.

But when that bastard laid his grimy hand on her, the puppy was gone and replaced by my wolf. And he was pissed off.

I was surprised the whole bar hadn't heard my growl, crowded or not.

Then he'd started pushing her back into the darkest corner of the hallway, no doubt to do some dark deeds, and I lost it. I lunged, grabbed, and smacked faster than the fat asshole could stop his beer gut from jiggling.

The way my wolf was howling with rage, he was lucky I hadn't shifted right then. An ache had started in my bones, my wolf trying to come out to rip the i***t's throat out. Luckily, I'd had my temperamental wolf long enough to know how and when to get him to back down.

Still, my wolf whined as I let the bastard walk away.

That left Sasha staring at me, and me staring at Sasha.

I hadn't expected hugs and kisses but... she slapped me. What the hell was that for?

The question died in my throat as those large eyes, deep and wide and blue as any ocean, bore into mine, challenging and fierce.

Her soulful blue eyes had always been one of my favorite features of hers. They were as sharp as a knife, and they spoke volumes without her ever saying a word.

They pierced into mine, seeing through me and any number of facades I could have thrown in front of her, daring me to respond in kind. But my wolf was a cub in the palm of her hands. Damn it.

Her scent wrapped around me and all I wanted to do was breathe the same air as her. It was a risk to reach up and push her hair behind her ear, but well worth it to see a hint of warmth break the cold death glare she held on me.

I lowered my hand with a sigh. I wasn't going to be seeing the girl again anyway, so it shouldn't matter.

But my inner wolf was still licking his wound.

Personally, I'd been shocked, but now I was just amused. I wondered whether, if Sasha were old enough to have a wolf, hers would be all preening and smug right now.

Hell, I wondered if Sasha herself was all preening and smug right now.

Another pothole had me glaring at the rearview mirror, but this time, Ian did not meet my eyes. I could see his lips twitching, though, and it added to my foul mood.

I growled in warning, then turned my attention to the pile of mail next to me. It was so big, it was being held in place by a length of twine. Such was the life of a royal official.

Complaints would be the bulk of the pile, I knew, probably more than a few about the very potholes we kept hitting. You couldn't be a Royal Engineer without getting complaints about infrastructure. I was tempted to slit the twine with a claw and start getting the pain over with, but the way the expensive sedan was jostling, I decided it would be better to open it at home instead of collecting scattered letters from all over the car.

I blew out a frustrated breath and leaned my head back on the seat, closing my eyes. This new library project occupied the bulk of my time, thank the Moon Goddess, but there was no shirking my other duties. Sleep had become a luxury, and just as I was about to grab some of it, Ian stopped the car.

"We're here, sir," the graying chauffeur said.

I blinked, looking out the window.

I'd designed my home myself in a modern, yet cozy style. How I'd managed to make it look cozy at its large size was a marvel of modern engineering, and, I thought proudly, a testament to my engineering skills. Sunlight glinted off of tan brick and tall windows. Ivy was just starting to creep up the sides from where I'd planted it.

It was home, and I felt a great weight slide off my chest just looking at it.

Ian cleared his throat, and I realized he'd already gotten out of the driver's seat and come around to open my door.

"You really are a pain in the ass, Ian," I grumbled, stepping out.

Ian grinned. "I know, sir."

I shook my head, stomping across the cobblestone to the front door. But inwardly, I was chuckling.

The door swung in to reveal a large foyer of stone tile floor and a sweeping, curved staircase. I walked right past the staircase, past the wide living room, and into the modern kitchen.

I dropped the mail on the counter with a loud thud, startling my vampire and best friend roommate, Brady, as he sat at the table eating cornflakes. Thanks to a serum synthesized from the blood of the White Queens, vampires no longer needed to drink blood. It still gave me a bit of a tickle to see him eating things like cornflakes, snack cakes, and pizza, though.

"Problems?" Brady groused at me, pushing his bowl aside.

"Aren't there always?" I grunted, finally elongating a claw and slashing through the twine holding my mail together.

As expected, it spilled across the counter, carrying with it all manner of correspondence.

I sighed and started sorting.

One second Brady was at the table, and the next, he was leaning over my shoulder, taking in the voluminous stack. "You got all this in two days?"

I jumped and glared at him. "Will you stop that?"

Brady grinned unrepentantly. "Nope."

"Of course not." It was Brady's second favorite hobby, scaring the crap out of me with his creepy, silent vampire movements.

His first....

"Don't you have some girl waiting for you in your bedroom?" I prompted.

"Not right now," was his annoying response.

Great. Now I had to open my mail with a running commentary.

I decided to bite the bullet and start on the pile of complaints. As expected, there were more than a few about the potholes, as well as many from ordinary shop owners and citizens about plumbing, electricity, water quality, and the like. City water was purified and just fine. Outside the city, however, it was still a bit hit-and-miss as the kingdom continued to modernize and expand.

"Is this one really about redoing the palace steps because, and I quote, 'Mr. Nibbles is having a hard time climbing the stairs in his old age'?" Brady asked, trying to hold back a laugh.

The plea for Mr. Nibbles had even come with a photo of the small, aging black terrier, as though that would help persuade the Royal Engineers to demolish the palace steps. I wanted to bang my head on the counter.

"What's this?" Brady asked, moving on to the next pile, bored with the complaints.

I wished I had the luxury of just moving on from boring complaints, but I followed Brady's movements as he snatched a general report to the royal staff out of the middle of the second stack. The man's eyes were better than a hawk's.

We both sobered, looking at it.

Rogues had been spotted at the wild edge of civilization again, rogue Lycaons who believed any breach of the ancient borders was an attack on them and their way of life.

Sure, we tried to respect the ancient borders, keeping them to their side and us to ours, but as the borders of the kingdom expanded, we'd begun bumping heads with the rogues. This had led to some rather... violent... ends.

"You remember that poor bastard last week, the one who nearly lost his legs before they could get to him?" Brady asked.

I blew out a long breath. "I remember."

"This isn't getting any better. What does Alpha King Xander have to say about it?" Brady asked.

"Don't know yet."

But I would soon. As one of the engineers currently building at the wild edge, there would be no avoiding a serious conversation about rogues next week when I had an audience with the king.

"Well, keep me posted. Hey, that one says it's from the university. Think they've assigned you your college grunt yet?" Brady asked.

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "I think the term you're looking for is 'intern.'"

"Right, yeah, the official coffee runner, whatever," Brady said. This time, he didn't wait for me to open the envelope myself, quickly slitting it open and dumping the contents on top of the river of mail.

A letter of introduction slid out, followed by a resume and portfolio. I picked up the letter, completely ignoring the other two.

No... it couldn't be....

Hell, now my whole life was filling up with potholes....

"What?" Brady asked, noting my expression. "What is it?"

"A mistake, that's what it is, and one I need to tend to immediately," I said, crumpling up the letter and tossing it on the counter. I started making strides toward my office.

Brady unwrinkled the letter, then let out a bark of laughter so loud it shook the walls.

I grimaced and took the stairs two at a time, determined to get to the office before Brady could come to heckle me.

No such luck—the quick-as-lightning vampire was at my heels in seconds, still laughing his head off.

"Man," he chortled, "you just can't catch a break, can you?"

I growled, but Brady was unfazed. "I'm straightening this out with King Xander right now. There's no way in hell—no way."

"You could just turn the other cheek," Brady snickered.

I scowled at him, but that didn't keep him from bursting ahead of me into my office and taking a seat on the edge of my desk.

"Do you f*****g mind?!" I snarled.

"Nope," Brady said. "Wouldn't miss this for the world."

Muttering under my breath, knowing there would be no dislodging Brady, I pounded my fingers into the phone, calling King Xander's assistant for an immediate audience with the king.

On the one hand, Sasha would have to be quite gifted, and quite well-connected, to be put forward for this internship. Gifted, I could use. Angry and slap-happy—not a chance. As amusing as it might be to have her around to tease and bother, I took my career seriously.

No. No way was I exposing my project to the volatile, bitter machinations of that particular prospective intern.

No way.

Not Sasha f*****g Wentley.

Chapter 946: A Royal Pain

Lucas

The guards stopped me at King Xander's gate.

"Lucas Black," I said. "I'm here for an audience with the Alpha King." I raised my very businesslike briefcase for emphasis.

The guards looked at each other and nodded, one waving to a third inside the guard station behind the gate.

The third guard cued the gate to open, and I swept past the guards without a word.

Tall wooden double doors that could be barricaded from the inside led into a wide, granite foyer, still festooned with pillars. It still gave me both a tickle and a twinge of sadness that the columns were mostly repurposed from ancient architecture, sort of a finger at the old ways. Back in the day, when the palace was constructed, the Lycaon Church had loudly protested the practice of tearing down the old to make something new.

I was now doing the same with the Great Northern Library, which, in fairness, had become a moldering old pile of bricks by the time we got there to restore it. Nothing about it had been worth saving, except the books and artifacts.

King Xander's large audience room was down a very long hallway, which could feel even longer if you knew you came bearing bad news. Today, the hall felt particularly long. Rogues and Sasha... Rogues and Sasha... neither were going to be pleasant topics.

Another two guards stood outside of the chamber, eyeing me from head to toe, to briefcase.

"Lucas Black?" one grunted.

"Yes," I responded.

He poked his head in the heavy wooden doors. "Lucas Black, Your Majesty."

"Send him in," was the king's loud reply. "And tell Marcus we could use some coffee."

"Of course, Your Majesty," the guard said, and he gestured for me to enter.

The room where King Xander granted audience was long, pillar-strewn, and decorated on one wall with stained glass windows, depicting some of the most important events in our history. Though there was a dais and a modest throne at the end of the long walk to the head of the room, King Xander was perched behind his desk today, which was mostly hidden by two columns, but enjoyed colorful lighting from the stained glass windows behind it.

"Lucas," King Xander said, looking up and smiling at me. "It's great to see you, even on such short notice."

His smile was infectious, and I felt a little more relaxed. "It's good to see you as well, Your Majesty."

"Have the rogues been bothering you at the library site?" King Xander asked, getting right down to it. "Is that why we needed to move our meeting up from next week?"

I cleared my throat. "No, no trouble with the rogues at the site, even though we are getting awfully close

to their territory, nothing like what's happening in other areas."

"Growing pains," King Xander sighed. He sat back, gesturing for me to sit in the chair across from him.

I sat down and set my briefcase to my side. Inside were Sasha's resume and portfolio, though honestly, I hadn't looked at either. There didn't seem to be much point.

I was a bit interested in the portfolio, but the audience had been granted so quickly, I decided I didn't have enough time to properly review it.

Though, I thought with a slight smile, it wouldn't surprise me one bit if the studious Sasha Wentley had surpassed even me in honing her abilities. I'd been a good student, passionate, but Sasha had always been more hardworking than anyone I knew. It was a shame she was so hot-tempered.

"What's so funny?" King Xander asked with a frown.

"Nothing much," I replied quickly. "Not the rogues or anything like that. Just... well, what I came to talk to you about, actually."

"Not the rogues?" King Xander arched an eyebrow.

"Them as well. Both topics have to do with the library." I pulled my briefcase up from the floor and snapped it open.

"Let's start with some good news, shall we?" King Xander sighed. "I could really use some right now, after all these attacks on our borders."

I nodded and took out some plans I'd drawn up. "Since the rogues are determined to think we're not respecting their borders, I thought a wall between their territory and the library might be in order—not a terribly high one, mostly just symbolic. That way, we can show them we're determined to stay on our side and them on theirs."

King Xander pursed his lips. "You don't think they'll perceive it as a threat?"

I shrugged. "They perceive everything as a threat. I thought at least this way, unsuspecting citizens wouldn't just go wandering outside the library grounds into rogue territory."

"Hmm." The king looked at the plans. "I suppose a barrier of some kind is in order, given how close to the rogue territory the library is. At least you didn't think of putting up some ghastly chain link fence."

With a grimace, I shook my head. "That would completely ruin the aesthetic of the new library."

"Indeed," King Xander agreed. He steepled his fingers under his chin. "And the bad news?"

"I can't work with Sasha Wentley. There has to be a more suitable candidate for the work-study program," I said.

King Xander's eyebrows nearly hit his hairline. "She comes highly recommended by the White Queen herself. Can I ask why you think you can't work with her?"

Ah. Queen Lena herself had Sasha's back. I hoped I hadn't put my foot in it, but if I had, it was too late.

"Well," I said uncomfortably. "She...."

What? She slapped me across the face? Telling the king about such a show of unprofessionalism could tank Sasha's whole career. I didn't want that.

"We... have a history," I tried to explain instead.

King Xander groaned. "Lucas, if I asked my wife to reject every student in the engineering school who you slept with, we would be left with a very small pool to choose from. The top ten in that class are women."

My cheeks heated. "That's not what—"

"If it ended badly, work it out between you. She'll have received her acceptance letter by now. As far as I know, she hasn't approached the queen to complain about you."

King Xander's stern expression should have been reserved for a young pup about the age of ten. Maybe I wasn't the only one holding onto the past.

"I just want the project to go smoothly," I finally said lamely. I had put my foot in it, and now I sounded like a petulant child.

Damn it all.

"Then smooth things over. I know you can be a perfectly charming man, Lucas. See if you can't use that charm for good." King Xander chuckled.

"Of course."

King Xander inclined his head. "Is that all?"

"For now, yes, Your Majesty," I said.

"Good. I'll want a full report on how the library build is going by the end of the month. For now, I think you have your hands full with... other things." King Xander speared me with another look. "Try not to sleep with her again."

I ground my teeth. I hadn't even slept with her once. Though, the idea wasn't entirely....

"Of course not, sir," was the response I settled on before my brain could take the thought any further.

"Excellent. I'm glad you shared the wall plans with me. It looks good," the king said. "Now, get to work."

I nodded, stood, and bowed. I wasn't sure if he meant get to work on Sasha, the library, or both.

I decided first, I needed to work on Sasha.

I left the palace less than pleased. Even though it seemed like a very bad idea, Sasha and I had to figure out how to work together. I couldn't let our personal history get in the way of a successful project. I would have to push my own feelings aside and focus on the task at hand.

As I flipped through the pages of her portfolio, I couldn't help but be impressed with Sasha's work. The designs were clean and modern, but also practical and functional. It was clear she had a keen eye for detail and a strong sense of aesthetics. I couldn't deny that she was talented.

But then I came across a design that caught my eye. It was a large, open space with floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked a beautiful lake. The concept was ambitious, but brilliant. I could see why the White Queen herself had recommended Sasha for the work-study program.

A vision of Sasha popped into my mind, and I felt a sudden tugging in my chest. I felt very proud of her. She was a far cry from the rough-and-tumble girl never backing down from a fight. She was a gorgeous woman, with her long blonde hair and stunning blue eyes and a scent....

Whoa... I had to focus. The project came first. I was the manager and she was the work-study intern. We both had to keep that clear.

Sasha

"So basically, you slapped the guy in charge of the biggest, most important opportunity of your whole life," Amanda said, staring at me from her bed.

I was at my desk, going over the rest of the papers, the introduction with Lucas Black's name on it flipped over so I could at least pretend it wasn't there, that he wasn't there.

"Thank you so much for putting it in that completely soul-destroying way," I moaned, putting my hands over my face.

Even with the page flipped over, I could almost see the name burning through the back.

"Just stating facts." Amanda shrugged. "What do you plan to do about it?"

"Crawl down a hole and die," I grumbled.

Amanda snorted. "No, really. That's not the attitude of the Sasha Wentley I know. You're gonna fix it is what you're going to do, right? Right?"

"How?" I despaired. "Amanda, I basically slapped my boss. I wouldn't be surprised if he's getting me thrown off the project as we speak."

Amanda got up and peered over my shoulder. "And yet you are still going over the library specs like you're planning to do the work-study anyway."

Glumly, I nodded my head. "Okay, I might have slapped the bastard. But he deserved it."

Amanda rolled her eyes. "That's the spirit. Lead with that when you talk to him. Sasha, he seemed perfectly charming at the bar."

"You don't know him, Amanda. He made my childhood a living hell." I smacked my fist down on the overturned paper as though it meant I could slap him again.

"So... that would be... at least seven years ago?" Amanda asked. "Is that the last time you saw him?"

"Ten," I corrected her.

"Ten—sweet mercies of the White Queen, Sasha! Ten years and you're still holding on to some childhood bullshit?!" Amanda gaped.

I could feel myself pouting. "You don't know what he did."

"It must be something pretty bad to have you all wound up like this." Amanda c****d her hip against the side of my desk, facing me now.

I tucked my hair behind my ear and looked away. "It was. Can't we just agree that he's an ass?"

"Wow. It must have been something pretty bad," Amanda said. She nodded. "Okay, we can agree he's an ass, a dreamy, charming ass."

"Fine." I pointedly turned another page, pretending to be absorbed in my work. Just discussing him made the scent of rosewood and citrus fill the air. It did things to my pulse and my stomach I didn't want to think about.

"Hey," Amanda said, putting a hand on my shoulder. "If you say he's an ass, he's an ass. Solidarity among friends, right? I was only teasing before."

I nodded. "Lucas Black is the biggest ass you're ever going to meet."

There was a knock on the open door frame. Amanda and I both turned to look.

My stomach hit my toes when I realized I hadn't imagined the dark citrus and rosewood scent. "Er... L-Lucas...."

"In the flesh," Lucas replied, stepping into our dorm room.

"I'm just going to see that guy about that thing," Amanda said, making a quick exit.

Lucas replaced her at the edge of my desk, his arms folded.

"So," he grinned. "We were discussing my ass?"

Moon Goddess, I wanted to slap him again.

Chapter 947: Serious Conversations

Sasha*

"We were not discussing your ass," I said flatly, scowling at this man I seemed cursed to run into over and over again. I must have done something terrible in a past life... like murder.

"It was either that, or you were calling your supervisor an ass, and I'd rather go with option one, wouldn't you?" Lucas said, arching an eyebrow.

I felt my cheeks get hot. "It... I...."

"Or maybe I should pretend I didn't hear anything at all?" Lucas suggested with a casual shrug.

I grabbed the peace offering with both hands. "Option three, please."

"I thought you might lean that way," Lucas replied.

I fiddled around my desk, organizing things that were already meticulously organized while Lucas cast his eyes on me, then at the sketches that peppered the walls between my bed and the window, taking up precisely half the room.

"You're very... tidy," Lucas said after a while.

I stopped fiddling around with a folio. "Tidy?"

I looked at the militantly spaced renderings of what I'd thought the new library should look like, and wanted to scream. He saw my sketches and the best he could say about them was that they were 'tidy'?

It also irked me that I craved his approval at all... or accolades, or whatever I'd been hoping for from him.

"Did you come here for a reason?" I asked, more sharply than I'd intended.

Lucas gave me the side-eye. "Yes, actually. I was rather hoping you could drop the attitude so we can work together."

"Attitude?!" I snapped. Where did he get off?

"Sasha, if you can't be around me without snarking all the time, we can't work together. I'm a site manager, not a babysitter," Lucas said sternly.

"Babysitter?!" I scoffed.

"Yes," Lucas replied, still stern. "I can't have you berating me and slapping me in front of the men. Hell, I'd rather you not do it anytime, but I figure at the work site was a good start."

"Maybe if you weren't such an insufferable bastard...." I began.

Lucas sighed and turned toward the door. "I knew this was going to be a lesson in futility. I'll contact your advisor to have you reassigned—"

Crap. I shot to my feet and grabbed his arm. "No, Lucas, wait."

Heat crackled between us from where we touched. It burned in Lucas's eyes when he looked at me. "And we'll have none of that, either."

"None of what?" I asked.

"You know what," Lucas said quietly.

I looked down at his arm and swallowed, then deliberately let him go. "Lucas, this library project is my dream assignment. Please don't throw me off it. I'll... I'll be professional."

He exhaled slowly.

"I can't afford to have anything go wrong on this project," Lucas grunted, and I could feel a heaviness in his words. "If you stay on the project, it is important that we are able to be in the same room and work together without you trying to tear my head off. You need to be respectful."

I could feel anger boiling in my gut. "What about you?"

"I'm always professional...."

I opened my mouth to reply, but he gently placed a hand over my mouth.

"We've gotten off on the wrong foot, but if we can fix this." He gestured between us and he lowered his hand from my mouth. "Then I think we can work together."

I should be grateful. I knew it. But more than gratitude, I felt bitterness at having to be grateful to him in the first place.

Lucas frowned at me. "The expression on your face is not reassuring at all."

"I said I'll be good, and professional. What more do you want?" I asked, exasperated.

"I haven't seen you demonstrate it yet," Lucas said.

I scowled at him, but couldn't say he was wrong. There was just something about this man that rubbed me the wrong way. And then there was what he'd done when we were kids...

"I'm trying," I replied between my teeth.

"You're not succeeding," Lucas informed me.

I sighed and tugged his wrist so he dropped down to have a seat on my bed while I occupied my desk chair. "Okay, what needs to change?"

"Better," Lucas said. "First of all, it might help build some professional distance if you call me 'Mr. Black.'"

"Mr. Black." I tried not to sound dubious when I said it.

"Not a heartening tone of voice, but I'll take it as a start," Lucas chuckled.

I blushed. "Well, then, I suppose you'll call me Miss Wentley?"

"If that's what you want," Lucas agreed.

"That's what I want. And I want somewhere to work, not just a folding table under a tarp somewhere," I insisted, hoping I wasn't pushing my luck.

Lucas laughed. "Alright. I'll make a little spot for you in the trailer."

Wow, that was easy.

"Alright," Lucas said with a smile that did things to my stomach I'd rather not think about. "Any other demands?"

"I want to do more than just get coffee. I'd like to really be involved," I responded, nervously pushing my hair back behind my ear.

"Yeah, I noticed." Lucas gestured around at all my renderings.

"I just wanted to be prepared," I mumbled self-consciously.

As he looked over my sketches, I couldn't help but notice how much space his large frame took up in my tiny room. I could feel his body heat radiating and I struggled to maintain my composure.

I tried my best to focus on the drawings and not the man looking at them, but my eyes couldn't stop wandering over his features, and my mind kept pointing out the fact that this incredibly handsome man was in my room, looking at my work. It was overwhelming. I couldn't believe it.

Finally, he finished his critique and turned to me. "You know, you're quite talented," he said, his eyes fixed on mine.

I couldn't help but blush at the compliment, and I looked away from him.

I could feel the weight of his gaze on me as if he was trying to read my thoughts. He seemed to study me for a moment longer before turning away.

"I wouldn't want anything to jeopardize our working relationship," he said. His tone was low and mellow, but I knew what he meant. If I couldn't control my temper, I would be off the project faster than I could blink.

"I understand," I said, trying to keep any stinging saltiness out of my voice. I looked at him, meeting his eyes once more.

Lucas smiled, and my heart skipped a beat as his smile stole my breath.

"I am very impressed with your work. These drafts are beautiful. The design's already been settled on, but if you don't mind, I'd like to take a few of these in case we need to make changes to the plans along the way."

I looked up at Lucas. "Really?"

"Really," Lucas said.

"Take anything you want!" I blurted, standing to take them down myself.

Lucas stood at the same time and we ended up bumping into each other. He took a sharp breath.

"Oh, Miss Wentley, I can't take 'everything' I want," he whispered, his breath ruffling the hair on top of my head.

I swallowed. "Designs..."

"Right. Those I will take." Lucas brushed past me and began removing a good number of drawings from my wall—more than I'd expected him to.

He did it with such care that for some reason I felt like crying. "Thank you, Mr. Black. I'm glad you like them."

"I do, really and sincerely. These are quite good. I can see why you were recommended for the library project, and have the queen's approval," Lucas said, opening his briefcase and laying the renderings carefully on top of each other.

"It was my first choice," I blurted.

Lucas raised an eyebrow, snapping his briefcase shut. "Oh? Nothing with Stone Hamline?"

"Oh, they never tell us until we get the posting who's in charge," I said.

"I see. What drew you to the library over, say, the new High Council building?" Lucas asked, leaning his hip against my desk.

"The designs for the High Council building are so stuffy," I complained. Then my hand flew to my mouth. "Those are Engineer Stone Hamline's designs, aren't they...."

Lucas's lips quirked. "They sure are."

I groaned. "Great. Slap one Royal Engineer, insult another. At this rate, I'll be designing the capital's sewer system."

Lucas let out a bark of laughter. "Actually, there are specialized engineers for underground structures like that, but I catch your drift. He won't hear from me that you don't like his designs." He leaned closer to me.

The air between us felt suddenly hot... burning hot.

"You liked my designs, then?" Lucas grinned.

I looked down at the floor, scuffing my foot at an invisible speck of dust. "Yeah... I guess I did."

Lucas's fingers brushed my temple and I glanced up, startled, as he smoothed my hair behind my ear.

"That is high praise indeed," he murmured.

"Why is that high praise?" I asked, confused.

"Because it came from you," Lucas said softly. Then he cleared his throat. "You know, a gifted designer and prospective engineer."

"Oh." I felt myself blushing again. "Thanks."

"You deserve it." Lucas looked around and swept his arm expansively around the room. "Have you entered any competitions? These are all great. Even the ones that have nothing to do with the library." He winked.

I giggled, honest to Goddess giggled. I could have kicked myself.

"Er... no. Not yet. We have a kind of art gallery competition type thing as a senior project where our designs will be hanging up in the... well, the new High Council building, actually. They will be evaluated, rated, and receive awards based on how good they are."

"I know you'll do well," Lucas said, seemingly oblivious to my girlish giggles. "Does your rating affect your grade?"

I shrugged. "Yes and no. If you really bomb, then you're not going to graduate for sure. But as long as you do passably well... I'm just worried about all the senior engineers who are going to be there, choosing new members for their teams. I want to impress them."

"You've already impressed me," Lucas replied, and I could tell he was sincere.

"Maybe you'll want me on your team," I joked.

Lucas tilted his head, considering. "Let's see how the library project goes. Don't slap me again, and maybe we'll see."

We stood there for a moment, looking at each other. I couldn't help but feel that there was something between us, something that I couldn't quite put my finger on.

Fighting against sudden breathlessness, I opened my mouth to respond. "It won't happen again," I promised.

His eyes trailed from my eyes down my face and landed on my mouth.

"Are you sure?" he pressed.

"Yes," I said firmly.

"This project... it's too important." There was another change in the atmosphere—he was serious, leaving no room for playfulness this time. Of course, he was right.

"I understand," I assured him.

"Do you?" he asked.

It was also said in all seriousness.

"I am sorry for slapping you, especially when you were only trying to help me," I said in all sincerity.

He grinned and massaged his cheek.

"I've been through worse," he said, surprising me. I was curious what he meant by that but he quickly continued, changing the subject. "Alright. Be sure you're up early to catch the first train. Work starts at eight-thirty. Don't be late."

"Yes, sir," I said, politely ushering him to the door.

Lucas turned to me before leaving. "And no slapping or insulting. I mean it."

"I get it," I huffed, mad at him all over again... as if I didn't understand the Realm Language. "I won't hit or insult you."

"Good," Lucas said. "Well, I consider this to have been a very productive meeting, Miss Wentley. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow."

He turned and left.

It took everything in me not to slam the door behind him.

Chapter 948: First Day

Sasha

Steam rolled past my waist from the resting train engine as I stepped down onto the platform... if it could be called that. "Platform" seemed a bit grand a word for the wooden, rustic landing at the side of the tracks.

I'd never been this far to the edge of the capital in the north country. There was a barrier ahead of the train here, which made me realize the train would now have to back up and turn around. This was the very last stop, where civilization ended and the wilds began.

There was a town here, though. And for it being so far from the capital, it was actually pretty big. I'd expected I'd be able to see the library build site from where I was standing, but no such luck.

I took three steps down onto a gravel road, the air crisp and invigorating as I walked. As I got deeper into the town, with quaint little houses and shops, saw some streets were actually now being done over in cobblestone. Progress kept going everywhere, it seemed.

Following my instincts, I weaved my way through town. The streets curved back and forth, not set out on a grid like the city. Where they wanted a house or a shop or even the town hall, they'd plopped the building and then made the road come to it. It was incredibly frustrating, and I got turned around more than once.

I swore I passed the same dressmaker's shop six times before I found a path I was sure of, a path leading out of the maze. A path...

... leading straight to a river.

I checked my watch and groaned. It was already seven-twenty. I was supposed to be at the work site at seven-thirty. I'd hoped to be early, but now I was going to be late.

A sweet smell wafted on the wind, and I turned back toward town. This time, I followed my nose and my grumbling belly to a bakery, where the baker was just setting breads and sweets out in the shop cases.

"Are you open?" I asked hopefully.

The baker looked up and smiled. "Well, hello, city stranger. If you're paying, I'm open."

"Great," I said, fishing in my bag for coins. "I would just die to have one of those cinnamon twists."

"Good choice," the baker said, pulling one out of the case with thin wax paper. "This is my grandma's grandma's recipe. Family secret, you know." He winked.

I took the twist and handed the baker some coins, breathing in the sweet smell before diving right in. I was ravenous.

The baker chuckled. "Hungry?"

I blushed and wiped a crumb off my cheek. "Sorry," I said. "I was so nervous about my first day of my work-study that I couldn't bring myself to eat before I came. Then I smelled your lovely shop and I felt like I was starving."

"Work-study?" the baker asked.

"Yes," I replied, "only I'm bombing it already. I can't find where they're building the library."

"Ah, well, good thing you stopped in," the baker said. "I know where it is. You take that street there, take your first left, your second right, and follow the road to the edge of town. You can't miss it—huge bloody thing. I don't know why we need that monstrosity, when the last library was serving us just fine." He tapped his chin. "But then, if it brings people out to see it, I wouldn't mind some more city folk coming here and buying me out of stock."

"I want to buy you out of stock. These are delicious!" I licked my fingers. Perhaps it wasn't the most ladylike thing I've ever done, but I didn't want to miss a crumb.

The baker reached into the case again and pulled out a lemon tart. "For the road," he said, and shook his head when I tried to pay him. "Just tell all your friends about Lakemeadow Bakery, especially those at the construction site."

"Thank you," I replied, tucking the paper-wrapped tart into my bag. Then I checked my watch again. "I've got to run, literally. But I'll be back tomorrow!"

"I'll hold you to it," the baker said.

I ran out the open front door of the shop and out into the street, just as the town around me was coming alive. I had to weave my way around some disgruntled pedestrians, sprinting as fast as I could.

Scaffolding and part of a thick sandstone wall met my gaze as I reached the end of the road. Breathing hard, I stopped beneath the scaffolding and checked my watch.

Seven-thirty exactly.

"Hey!" a gravelly voice shouted. "Hey! No one comes on site without the proper protective equipment!"

I looked up to see an older man with a sour expression leaning over the edge of the scaffolding.

"Sorry, sir," I said, holding my sides. Moon Goddess, I'd never been this winded. "I just arrived. I'm the new work-study intern. If you could just direct me—"

The man hopped down. "Cutting it a little close, aren't we?" he grunted.

I blushed, though I was sure I was already red-faced from the mad dash I'd made to get here. "Sorry, I... got lost."

The man nodded to the papers peeking out of my bag. "You didn't think to look at the map?"

There was a map? Embarrassed down to my toes, I opened my bag and began shuffling through the papers. I'd been so focused on the designs....

The man sniffed the air. "Say, is that one of Jay's lemon tarts?"

I looked up from my search. "Yes, sir."

He grinned. "I'll trade you a lemon tart for not chewing your ass out. I'm the foreman, you see."

My shoulders sagged with relief and I handed over the lemon tart.

I swore the foreman's eyes rolled back in his head as he took the first bite. "Alright. Safety equipment is over there. Let's get you fitted for a hard hat, shall we?"

In short order, I had an orange helmet on and was making my way to the small trailer the foreman had pointed out as Lucas's office.

I thought of just walking in, as he'd done at my dorm, but I decided to be the bigger person and knocked.

"Come in." Lucas's clipped tone made me hesitate.

Drawing on my stoicism, I opened the door.

Lucas didn't even look up. He was standing over his desk, hair ruffled as though he'd been raking his hands through it, staring down at the library plans.

"What?" he asked in a grumpy tone.

I pushed my hair behind my ear. "Lucas... uh... Mr. Black... I'm here for my work-study."

Lucas looked up then with raised eyebrows. Then he grinned. "Mr. Black. I like that, Miss Wentley."

At least I hadn't called him "sir." I'd been raised to be polite, but there was not a popsicle in a crock pot's chance I was calling Lucas Black "sir."

"Is there someplace you want me to start?" I asked.

"Yes, actually," Lucas said. He gestured for me to join him behind his desk.

I squeezed in what little space there was between him and the wall and looked down at the plans in front of us. "Are these the old library's blueprints?" I asked, confused.

Lucas nodded, his shoulder brushing mine as he pointed to a specific spot in the middle of the first floor.

"There's something here that shouldn't be there. As we were digging up the old foundation, the ground gave way. It could have killed someone, honestly. We're not sure how wide or deep it is, but there's definitely a hole big enough here that it should have been marked on the original plans. Now, unless I'm losing my mind, I'm not seeing anything marked here on the original blueprints, are you?"

I looked over the blueprints slowly, but then shook my head. His citrus and rosewood scent was filling my nose, but I pushed the lightheaded and fluttery feeling it conjured aside and concentrated on business. "I don't see anything, sir." Oh Goddess damn it, I'd just called him sir....

Lucas lifted a curious eyebrow and smirked.

He then leaned over the desk next to me to read some handwritten scrawl on the edge of the old blueprints.

The heat from his body radiated in the space around me, and my breath caught in my chest as his arm pressed against mine. "Uh... Mr. Black...."

"Only something about needing an extra window on the south side," Lucas muttered, ignoring me.

"You'd think if there were a big damn hole in the middle of construction, they'd have mentioned it."

"Maybe they didn't know it was there?" I suggested, my voice breathy. I cleared my throat as Lucas looked at me. "I mean, they could have put the foundation down, and then over the years, water might have done its job and made some underground cave erode up closer to the surface."

"Hmm. Good point," Lucas said, nodding as he looked back at the plans. "In any case, we need to see how this is going to affect construction."

There was another knock at the door, and Lucas cued the person to enter.

In came the foreman. He was about to open his mouth when he blinked at Lucas and me. "This looks cozy," he commented, eyeing our shoulder-to-shoulder position.

Lucas stood up, shooting him an impatient look.

"Did you need something, Reece?"

"Right... I'm about to send a man down with a flashlight to see what we're dealing with."

Lucas nodded. "I'd like to be there to get the firsthand report."

"Thought so. That's why I came to get you and Lemon Tart," Reece the foreman grinned.

Lucas's eye twitched at the nickname, and it looked like his smile became more plastered on than genuine. "'Miss Wentley' will be coming with us."

The foreman shrugged. "You're the boss." He turned to lead us out of the trailer.

Taking a deep breath to steady myself, I pushed away the nervous energy that seemed to be building around us. I clipped along at Lucas's heels, trying and failing to match his long strides until we came to the hole in question.

The hole looked more like a cavern. It was nearly impossible to think that any foundation could have stood on top of it.

There was a rigging over the hole with a man strapped into a harness, his orange helmet fixed to his head and a flashlight the size of a femur in hand.

"Ready, Herb?" Reece asked.

"Ready," Herb grunted.

Two crewmen began lowering Herb down into the darkness.

The glow of his flashlight soon came back up through the hole, along with the most colorful swearing I'd ever heard in my life.

"What is it?" Lucas asked, going to the edge.

"A f*****g temple is what it is," Herb's voice filtered up.

"You've got to be shitting me," Lucas growled.

"Honest to Pete, it's a damn church, a whole damn church," Herb said.

I went to join Lucas, peering down into the darkness. I watched as Herb grabbed something.

Then the ground shook.

The edges of the foundation we stood on gave way beneath our feet, the crewmen and the foreman jumping back as the rigging began to fall.

It wasn't the only thing falling. I screamed as my footing slipped, I tried to jump out of the way myself, but I just couldn't gain traction in time to get clear. Icy fear gripped me as I prepared myself for the inevitable fall to my death.

Before I could whisper a prayer, strong arms grabbed me from behind and hauled me the rest of the way back.

My helmet fell off backward as my face pressed into a strong, muscular chest. Lucas's arms were tight around me, one around my waist, the other cradling my head against him. I took a moment to realize I was alive, listening to the rapid staccato of Lucas's heartbeat as it matched my own.

"Are you okay?" His whispered voice was raspy as it ghosted into my hair.

I nodded, gripping his shirt as though it were the center of gravity. I was plastered against the most handsome, most annoying man I'd ever had the misfortune to know. I could feel the eyes that witnessed the near fall and rescue beaming in on us, and I didn't care.

I just didn't want him to let go.

Chapter 949: Stalled

"I'm going to try to manage the fallout of this shitshow," I told her. "You let me know if you find anything in that journal."

"I will," Sasha said, opening it and turning her attention to the handwriting pages.

With a bracing breath, I stepped out of the trailer and onto the construction site, where many of the workers were driving in new posts to rope off the hole. I pitched in to make sure it was done right.

When that was done, I turned to address the crew.

"I'm sure you know by now we have to halt work for the time being. We need to get this temple thing checked out. I'll be sending you home until we can sort out this mess. I'd like to thank you for all your hard w—" I paused. "Who are you?"

Several men I didn't recognize from my crew, though still wearing construction clothes, walked up to the roping.

The men looked at me casually.

"We came with Stone Hamline. King Xander suggested he come to check on things around here and, well, he brought us with him just in case you needed help," one of them said.

I could hear Reece's growl from several paces away as he eyeballed the messenger with a sour expression.

"We don't," I assured him. "Where's Mr. Hamline?"

Five heads turned to look at the trailer where I'd left Sasha alone. "He went looking for you there."

f**k.

"Please remember what happens at this site is privileged information between the team, me, Miss Wentley, and King Xander," I reminded them all with a glare. "I don't want to go around town hearing anything about the discovery of this temple. Understood?"

"Yes, sir!" everyone responded.

"You're all dismissed for now." I nodded to the group, then just barely kept a measured gait as I returned to the trailer.

Stone was there, which I expected. What I did not expect was to see him leaning over Sasha's with a hand on her shoulder while she read.

Both looked up as I entered. They did look... cozy.

I felt a bolt of irritation as I watched Stone's hand lingering on Sasha's shoulder before finally pulling away. I knew I shouldn't feel possessive of her, but something about them being together like that made my wolf snap as I clenched my jaw to maintain control of him.

"Black," Stone smirked and I nodded.

"Hamline." I raised an impatient eyebrow and he cleared his throat before turning from and addressing Sasha.

"Some of that archaic language in that journal is hard to follow," Stone commented.

"It's not so bad," Sasha countered.

"You actually understand it?" he asked, impressed.

"Yes, I've read a lot of ancient texts concerning Dark Realm structures."

Stone looked at me and seemed as impressed as I was. He gave her shoulder a "friendly" pat and crossed the short distance to stand beside me. "I might have to steal this one from you, Black," he whispered in my ear while he clapped me on the back.

I could feel my blood boil at the insinuation. Stone always had a way of getting under my skin, but this time, it felt personal. I fought back the urge to push him away from me.

Instead, I forced a smile and replied, "Good luck trying, Hamline."

My eyes lingered on Sasha, trying to decipher the emotions that crossed her face as her curious and questioning eyes shifted between me and Stone.

Stone gave an innocent look and raised his hands in mock surrender. But it was entirely for Sasha's benefit.

"I was just kidding, Lucas. Honest. King Xander thought...."

"Yeah whatever. Get out."

"The king sai—"

"Leave. Now." I growled low in my throat.

"Lucas?"

I turned to see a worried look on Sasha's face.

Stone just smirked.

"I can see you're upset," he simpered. "I'll come back on a better day. Oh, Miss Wentley, do contact me. I'd love to go over my project sketches with you."

Sasha cleared her throat and replied politely. "Yes, I will. Thank you, sir."

The hell she would. "I've actually taken Sasha under my wing, Stone, so there's no need for you to look over anything with her."

Stone smirked again and gave a fake tip-of-the-hat to Sasha before heading out. It just began to rain as he stepped through the door.

I watched through the window as Stone and his men dodged the rain until they were gone, then turned to Sasha. "You are not to see that man."

"Excuse me?" Sasha said, drawing herself up in her folding chair. "How can—"

"What did he give you?" I demanded, cutting her off.

"What?" Sasha gaped.

"What. Did. He. Give. You," I enunciated clearly.

Sasha folded her arms. "Lucas, you're being un—"

I saw the white edge of a business card clutched between her fingers and snatched it away. While she squawked at me, I ripped it into pieces and threw it in the trash. It took everything in me not to light a match and set fire to it as well.

"Lucas!" Sasha protested.

"You'll thank me later," I grumbled.

Sasha stared at me, her brows furrowed fiercely. I met her gaze, feeling myself cool down as her face relaxed. The space in the trailer seemed to shrink and the air became thick with her lavender scent.

The work bell chimed, breaking the moment for us.

I exhaled, looked down at my watch, and frowned. "Damn it. The last train arrives in less than an hour."

"I know," Sasha said as she seemed to be catching her breath as well. "Anyway, I got done with the journal. There's nothing in it about the temple, and no pages are missing."

"Well, at least we know there was no record of the temple during the construction of the old library. That really could have come back to bite us in the ass."

"I suppose that's true," Sasha agreed. She stretched, and I could just see the rise and fall of her chest against her sweatshirt.

I bit back a groan. "Come on, Lemon Tart, we'd better get moving."

"Don't call me that!" Sasha protested as she picked up her bag and I picked up mine.

"Alright, princess."

"You are impossible," Sasha grumbled as we stepped out into the rain.

We'd only gone a short distance down the road, still edged by the tree line border between us and the rogues, when rain turned to hail. I quickly took off my shirt and held it over us, but it didn't give much shelter.

"We should head back to the...." I began.

Sasha was looking at the tree line.

My eyes followed hers, and I realized, in the blinding hail, we'd actually stepped past a tree.

Glowing yellow eyes stared at us, and there was a low, feral growl.

I grabbed Sasha's shoulder and tugged her back.

The growl turned into a snarl, and I realized the rogue was intent on blood.

"Sasha," I said in a low, firm tone, "I need you to run."

"But what about—?"

"I'll be right behind you," I responded. I kept my eyes on the rogue wolf for a moment, then gave Sasha a shove.

She began running.

The yellow eyes clocked the movement and went running after her, but, as I'd said, I was right behind her. The rogue's attention quickly returned to me, as I began feeling the shift in my bones. Cracking sounds could almost be heard over the twanging of the hail as I started to shift.

Both Sasha and I ran half on, half off the road, unable to see where we were going. We'd have a much better chance after I'd shifted, so if we could just stay ahead of the rogue until—

Sasha stumbled, hitting the ground with an awful thud and scrape of flesh. I was lucky I didn't tumble right over her.

"Get up," I commanded her, hauling her to her feet. "We need to keep going!"

I could smell copper and knew that yellow-eyed menace had just caused my Sasha to bleed. But she was a trooper, getting her forward momentum going again.

Unfortunately, that fall cost us what little distance there had been between us and the rogue.

And I had yet to complete the shift.

A barn, the first sign of civilization, was just visible through the rain and hail. I gripped Sasha's arm and steered her that way.

Mud kicked up around us as we ran through the neglected, grassy field. I laughed bitterly when we actually reached the gray, listing structure.

It was abandoned. Remnants of a charred farmhouse were nearby. There was no one around to help us.

Still, I hoped the vestiges of civilization would make the rogue turn away.

He had other ideas.

I dragged Sasha into the barn and closed the rickety doors, just to have the rogue slam into them and splinter right through.

Sasha and I backed up as the large, wet, yellow-eyed gray wolf licked its chops, looking from me, to Sasha, and back.

"Go behind me!" I said to Sasha. My tone brooked no argument.

She didn't argue, shuffling behind me.

"Look," I tried again, holding my hands out in a sign of peace. "It was raining so hard we couldn't see the border. We meant no harm or disrespect—"

The rogue snarled, then leaped into the air, smacking me to the moldy hay-covered floor.

Then he snapped his head up and looked at Sasha, licking his lips again.

My Sasha.

A low growl rumbled out of my chest.

That was the very last thing he was ever going to see.

Chapter 950: Torn

Sasha

Splintered old wood flew everywhere, shrapnel from the useless ancient barn door. It was followed by another explosion of wood chips as the rogue bit down on Lucas's arm and smashed him into a listing horse stall.

Dust stung my eyes as their movements kicked up the thick layer of dirt that had settled on this place. When I lost sight of Lucas beneath the hulking black form of the rogue wolf, I thought for sure he'd been killed.

Feelings bubbled and popped all over me and I felt as though I might burst. What I felt most was rage. How dare this rogue asshole attack us out of nowhere and kill my Lucas?!

I looked around and grabbed a rusty pickaxe that was hanging precariously on a bent peg. No doubt I was next, and I had no intention of going down like a wilting flower. And even if the rogue was satisfied just with killing Lucas, well, I was not satisfied.

A shrill cry filled the air, and I didn't even know it was me until I brought the pickaxe down on the rogue's back paw.

Old it may have been, but it was still sharp enough to cut right through the paw and bury itself in the ground.

The rogue howled, but for some reason did not turn to look at me.

Then I saw Lucas still struggling beneath the beast, holding its jaws open, keeping its teeth away from his throat and its attention squarely on him.

"Run, Sasha. Try to get to town!" Lucas barked over the rogue's snarling.

The hell I would. "I'm not leaving you here to fight a rogue by yourself! You haven't even shifted!"

Lucas growled deep in his throat, though I wasn't sure if it was meant for me or the rogue. "I would love to, but I'm a little busy right now. It would take too long. And you don't have a wolf—"

The rogue clawed Lucas's chest, deep bloody tracks that made him bellow in pain.

I ignored Lucas's words, more concerned about his predicament. Surely there was something I could do that would buy Lucas enough time to shift.

A broken hoe peeked up at me through the hay in another stall. I grabbed the busted handle and ran back over to Lucas and the rogue, swinging the handle with all my might at the back of the rogue's head.

There was a crack, and the handle snapped in half.

It was enough to get the rogue's attention, though. He clawed Lucas across the face, then reared back to face me.

The pickaxe was still stuck through its paw, though, and it took the appendage nearly clean off when the rogue turned around.

Raw hatred was in those yellow eyes.

Well, back at you, buddy.

I wielded the little shard that was left of the hoe handle, just a little stick really, holding it out in front of me like a knife. It wasn't even pointy, but it was all I had.

Blood trickled down over the rogue's eye and I realized from his wet fur that I actually had made a dent.

"Now, we tried to be nice," I said, proud my voice didn't tremble one bit. "But now you're just being a d**k. Lucas is going to tear you apart."

The rogue snorted and turned his head back in Lucas's direction.

It was the last mistake he ever made. With a roar, a bloody but truly magnificent, powerful brown wolf came barreling into the rogue. Lucas had his teeth around the rogue's throat before it could even whimper.

There was an ominous crunch, and then all that was left of the black wolf was a blank, yellow stare.

Lucas's head came up and his wolf glared at me with those stunning silver-flecked gray eyes.

I dropped the stick and pushed my hair behind my ear, my hand only trembling a little.

It took a couple of minutes and several pops before Lucas was in human form again. He stalked over and grabbed me by the front of the shirt, giving me a shake.

"Are you out of your mind?!" he screamed in my face.

I thought of something flippant to say, but Lucas didn't seem to be in the mood. He was angry... scary angry—at me.

I dropped my eyes as he started using a very Alpha voice on me. I quickly wished I hadn't. Lucas was bleeding, but he was also naked—so beautifully, gloriously naked.

I snapped my eyes back up just as Lucas trailed off, catching me looking at him.

"Did you even hear a word I said?" he asked in exasperation.

"Maybe?" I tried, my voice husky.

"Uh huh." Lucas caught my chin in his hand, his fingers wrapping hard around my jaw. His lips were a hairsbreadth from mine. "There something you want, princess?" he breathed over my skin.

I didn't know how to answer, and before I could, Lucas groaned and held his side.

"We'd better try to catch that train," he said. "I'd rather see a city doctor than whatever sawbones they have out here."

I nodded, berating myself for getting so caught up in... whatever that was... that I completely forgot about his injuries. "Here, let me help you."

Lucas reluctantly let me duck under the arm he wasn't using to put pressure on his wounds.

There were three s***h marks down his cheek as well, and his hands were cut, knuckles bruised, I noted as we walked. At least it had stopped raining.

"We really should stop somewhere to get you patched up a bit so you don't bleed out on the way home. That and clothes—clothes might be a good thing," I said, after Lucas leaned more and more of his weight on me.

To my surprise, Lucas didn't argue. "Where do you suggest we go?"

"I don't know the local doctor or anything... but I do know someone," I said, starting to steer us in the direction of the Lakemeadow Bakery.

"You know someone. Already?" Lucas gave me the side eye.

"What? He's nice and I think he'll take us in for the night," I said defensively. "Do you have any better ideas?"

Lucas's eyes narrowed. "He?"

"Yeah, Jay—nice guy, great baker." I was nearly sagging under Lucas's weight by the time we got to the locked front door. But the fact the bakery had a second floor suggested to me that Jay might live above it.

"You sure are popular with the men," Lucas grumbled.

I rolled my eyes. "You're delirious." I banged on the bakery door. "Hey, Jay! We need some help."

A light came up on the upper level and, sure enough, Jay came to the door with an old gas lamp, which reminded me that electricity was still something of a luxury in the hinterlands. "Hey, cinnamon twist," Jay grinned. Then his attention turned to Lucas and his smile faded. "Oh no, another f*****g rogue attack?!"

"Yeah. We got a bit turned around in the hail storm...." I began.

Jay didn't need any further explanation. He handed me the lantern and replaced me under Lucas's arm.

"Gonna need to try to get you upstairs, big fella," Jay said, nodding at me to go ahead and light the way. "There's a staircase in the storeroom. You can't miss it."

I moved ahead of them, through stacked bags of flour and shelves of all kinds of ingredients in the back storeroom to the bottom of the stairs. I paused there and turned. "Do you really think you can get him up there?"

"Better than leaving him on the floor in a puddle of flour and blood," Jay pointed out.

He had a point. "Lucas?" I asked.

Lucas merely grunted and put his foot on the first step.

"That's the spirit," Jay said, stepping up beside him.

The stairs were wide enough, just, for Jay to maneuver sideways as he helped Lucas up the steps.

I made sure they had a circle of lamplight all the way up.

The second floor was a very modest and cozy two-room home. Jay nodded to the open door to the second room and I lit the way into a small bedroom.

"Let's get you on the bed," Jay said to Lucas. "Then I'll go fetch Doc."

Lucas groaned at the idea, probably thinking back to his sawbones comment, but let Jay maneuver him into bed. He winced as Jay quickly pattered around the upstairs, tearing up old sheets and pressing them to his wounds.

"Keep pressure here until Doc comes. Then he'll tell you what to do," Jay instructed me. Then he left us alone.

I sat on the edge of the bed, my heart pounding as blood seeped between my fingers, no matter how much pressure I applied.

"It... looks worse than it is," Lucas said, putting a hand over mine.

I stared into his eyes, praying to the Moon Goddess he didn't die. "You should save your strength."

Lucas chuckled. "Really, princess, I've had worse."

My forehead crinkled. "You have?"

"Sure," Lucas replied. "Not my first rogue attack."

"You're kidding me," I gaped.

Lucas squeezed my hand. "It never gets easier, but yeah, I've had to deal with rogues before."

"What never gets easier?" I asked, confused.

"Killing," Lucas said. "Killing never gets easier."

I pushed my hair behind my ear. "Makes sense," I said after a while. "But he was going to kill us."

Lucas shrugged slightly and winced. "Still doesn't make it any easier," he wheezed.

A few tendrils of hair that Lucas kept longish on top were sticking in the claw tracks the rogue had left on Lucas's face. Not knowing how to answer, I reached out one hand to free the hair from the blood trail.

Lucas looked up at me with soft eyes. "I'm still mad at you, you know. You could have been killed."

"So could you," I responded, not sure where this was going. He wasn't angry, but he wasn't entirely his teasing self, either.

"I could have lived with that as long as he didn't kill you," Lucas said.

I bit back a laugh. "You literally would not be living if he killed you."

"True, but I still could have lived with it." Lucas raised a palm to my cheek. "You're very precious to me, Sasha. I don't want you taking crazy risks like that with your life. Okay?"

Precious? "Lucas... I..."

Footsteps sounded on the staircase and Lucas and I both turned our heads to look as Jay appeared with an aging man carrying a doctor's bag.

"Young lady," the elderly man panted, clearly winded, "you were supposed to be keeping pressure on his wounds."

I blushed and quickly pressed both hands to Lucas's chest.

Lucas's hand dropped from my cheek and he grimaced as the doctor snapped open his bag.

"No help for it. Antiseptic, antibiotics, and a good number of stitches," the doctor said, loading up a syringe. "Not the worst case I've seen by far. With any luck, your werewolf healing will have you right as rain in a week."

Lucas groaned. "Please, don't mention rain."

Jay chuckled, but the doctor was nonplussed. "It's a very good thing you didn't get hurt, young lady, as you don't have your wolf yet. Wounds like this could have killed you."

Right on cue, Lucas raised an eyebrow at me, the doctor perfectly punctuating his point.

"Yeah, well, it did buy you time to shift, didn't it? Besides, you think I would have just gotten away after he killed you? You ought to be thanking me," I huffed.

Lucas's lips twitched as the doctor leaned over and gave him a shot of antibiotics. "So, what you're saying is we're even."

"Even?" I echoed. "What do you mean by that?"

"I saved you from near death, you helped get me out from under the rogue," Lucas said.

Pursing my lips, I thought about it. "I guess we are even."

"Good. Now, I expect we'll be able to have a better working relationship," Lucas continued.

I frowned at him. First I'm precious, now we were colleagues?

This guy was giving me whiplash.

"Young lady, you can take your hands off him now," the doctor said. "I suggest you get out of those wet clothes before you catch cold."

"I've got some clothes you can borrow," Jay offered.

A growl rolled out of Lucas, and I scowled at him. He was blowing hot and cold, and honestly, I had no idea what to make of him at this point.

"Thanks, Jay, that would be great," I replied, ignoring Lucas's warning rumble.