

Kings Breeder 961

[Chapter 961: Mysteries of Lycaon](#)

Sasha

"Lucas—I mean Mr. Black—has been given another site to oversee?" I asked, sitting across the desk from Professor Augustine.

She nodded enthusiastically. "I was surprised as well, given the disaster of this last one, but I guess as it wasn't his fault, he can't exactly lose favor."

I was relieved and happy for Lucas, but....

"What does this have to do with me?"

"He's requested you for his new project, to intern on a work-study," Professor Augustine said eagerly.

It had been a week with not one word from Lucas. I supposed all that blowing hot and cold was set on cold right now. It really was starting to make me angry. "Are there any other work studies available?" I asked, though I already knew the answer.

"I'm afraid not. Stone Hamline has you on his short list, but he's got his intern slots all filled for at least another month," Professor Augustine replied. She gave me a hard look. "Do you have a problem working under Lucas Black?"

"No, professor." I backpedaled quickly. "I just wanted to... broaden my experience, that's all."

Professor Augustine nodded. "An admirable desire, but one that's just not possible to fulfill at this time. Lucas Black has the only opening that's available right now. It's a new project, so you'll be able to broaden your experience in that way."

When Professor Augustine didn't produce a packet, I asked, "Do you happen to know what sort of project this is?"

"Strengthening infrastructure out west—he had a specific village in mind, and he's right, it needs work," Professor Augustine said. "It came up just this morning. I'm afraid there's been no time to prepare a research packet for you, but the journey west is a long one. I'm sure Lucas will be able to fill you in on the details along the way."

It wasn't anything so grand as a library, but it was the kind of grunt work I'd be doing as a new engineer, so I figured it would be a good opportunity, even if I did have to work with Lucas Black again.

"I'll take it," I told the professor.

"Excellent," Professor Augustine said with a smile. "The train leaves in the morning. Lucas is back at the library site, as I understand it. It might be a good idea to meet him out there to get the full details of your journey."

I thought of the temple and shuddered.

"It seems the temple imploded one night not long ago, and Lucas is making his excuses to the Lycaon Church," Professor Augustine went on, as though she'd read my mind.

Imploded? Relief flooded my system. "Yes," I said, rising. "I think I will head out there and talk to Luc-Mr. Black. Thank you very much, professor."

"Thank Lucas when you get there," Professor Augustine replied. "He's the one responsible for all of this, not me."

"I will," I agreed.

But, I reflected as I lifted my bag over my shoulder, if he tried to kiss me again, this time, I was going to knee him in the nuts.

"... destroy the whole thing. Pummel it to dust." An unfamiliar voice filtered out of Lucas's trailer.

I adjusted the hard hat on my head, deciding, given the heated tone, it would be best I not burst into the library site office at that particular moment. But I did find myself hesitating at the three wooden steps leading up to the closed door, my hand poised over the rail as Lucas gave an equally heated reply.

"So, just because this is a temple of the Moon Goddess, with a statue of the White Queen in it, you've decided it has no historical merit?" Lucas seethed. "I don't suppose this has anything to do with the conflict between the Lycaon Church and those who worship, and worshiped, the Moon Goddess."

I heard a low growl and swallowed, wondering if they were going to shift and fight in there. The popping of bones was not blocked by the thin walls either.

"Just destroy it," the stranger hissed, "by order of the Lycaon Church."

"Hmm... gee... isn't it fortunate I don't work for the Lycaon Church, then," Lucas responded.

Another growl, more popping, and then suddenly a yip.

"Get out," Lucas said. "I'll deal with the temple when and how it best serves our people. And for that, I'm going to rely on the science of an archeologist, not the superstitions and prejudices of the Lycaon Church."

The command in Lucas's tone made me melt. Much as I personally would have liked the temple to be completely pulverized, Lucas had a point. And I could just see him, head held high, gray eyes flashing, drawn up to his full height... an impressive specimen of a man.

The door to the trailer banged open, startling me out of my daydream. A dark-haired man in the vestments of a Lycaon priest stormed down the three wooden steps, shoving me aside and sneering at me as he passed.

"O-okay," I murmured.

When I looked up, Lucas was in the doorway. Whatever had transpired between him and the priest had him so worked up that his gray eyes still crackled. His sleeves were rolled up his arms and his shirt was unbuttoned almost to his chest, exposing a tantalizing trail of tanned skin.

His gaze fell on me, then, and his expression softened.

My knees felt like jelly. How was I supposed to keep this professional if I kept reacting this way? I despaired of being able to knee him in the balls if he actually did kiss me.

"Sasha," Lucas said, and my name sounded like warm butter in his mouth. "Come on in."

I made my way up the stairs and into the trailer, getting the feeling I might be walking right into a dragon's lair. Or a wolf's den, as it were.

Much to my relief, and disappointment, Lucas did not try to embrace me once the door was closed. He circled behind his desk instead, putting it between us and the energy that warmed the air.

I tugged at the collar of my sweater, suddenly very hot.

"Don't," Lucas said sharply. Then he swallowed. "Don't take it off."

Heat rose to my cheeks. "I wasn't going to."

"Good." Lucas moved lists and sketches and blueprints for the scrapped northern library out of the way on his desktop, revealing a large map of Egoren, the Dark Realm. Both of us were from the Light Realm and had emigrated, so it was probably best that Lucas had a map to show me when he pointed his index finger at a red mark in the territory of the Midnight Sun Pack.

"We're going here," he said. "I have an archeologist friend—well, cousin—who lives there who is going to help us figure out what's going on with that temple and... the orb."

Cold sliced through me and I took a step back. "You're telling me I'm going to that village with you and the orb?"

"Yes," Lucas replied. He grimaced. "I need you to be where I can see you. I don't know what this orb intends to do with you, but I want to be there beside you when it does... whatever it's going to do. And you're not going to have any peace until we find out what that orb is and its purpose. You know that."

I swallowed. "Can't we just leave it locked up in your safe?" I all but begged.

"I thought about that." Lucas sighed and shook his head. "That's where it was the last time it took you. It doesn't seem to care if it's in physical contact with you or not." Lucas looked at me with a pained expression. "What if... what if it takes you somewhere again and if I'm not with you..."

"You think you might forget me?" I asked softly. I hadn't thought of that.

"Being with you is the only thing I know to do right now. I don't know what else to do to keep you safe."

I could see his point. Part of me just wanted to run from the trailer and go hide under my bed back at the university.

But I was no coward, and I wasn't going to live in fear of that orb for the rest of my life. Lucas had a lead to possible answers and he was willing to protect me, or at least try.

That he was willing to undertake this journey at all was... touching. Even if he couldn't stop the orb from taking me again, I knew in my heart that he would scour heaven and hell to find me, and be there when I got back.

"You're sure... you don't just want to write ahead and send me along with the orb on my own?" I still asked. "I mean, it's not your problem...."

"It is my problem," Lucas said.

My eyes met his. "Why?"

Lucas looked at me sincerely. "Because it involves you."

I swallowed into my tightening throat.

I wanted him to kiss me. He wanted to kiss me. And the desk between us was the only thing stopping it from happening.

Lucas cleared his throat. "We should probably be getting back to the capital now. I don't think we should rely on Jay's good graces all the time."

The spell broken, I simply nodded. "Yes, the train."

Lucas came around from behind the desk and put a hand at my back, ushering me out of the trailer. He stayed close to me the whole walk back into town. I was sure he was scanning the trees for rogues.

I felt eyes on me. I'd started to become used to it, but now that we might be in real danger, it was as though I was under a microscope in a classroom full of strangers.

Lucas raised his hand from the small of my back and put his hand at the nape of my neck, rubbing his thumb in small, soothing circles.

"I don't think there will be another rogue," he said softly.

I looked at him and swallowed. I was no longer afraid of being a rogue's prey....

We arrived at the train station before I realized we were even in town. Lucas's presence, his warm hand on me—it confused all my senses. I was glad he still had the wherewithal to purchase tickets for the correct destination, as my voice came out breathy.

We made our way to a private compartment, and Lucas settled me down across from him.

Distance... professional distance... professionalism—I repeated the mantra in my head, but it was no use. Lucas's leg slid to the inside of mine, and I stopped breathing altogether.

I mustered my best annoyed look, though desire was radiating right through my veins and up my inner thigh from the place our legs touched.

Lucas simply raised an eyebrow at me in challenge.

I swallowed. There was no way I was backing down.

"So," Lucas said, completely unbothered by the fact the movement of the train was rubbing our legs together, "we'll meet tomorrow morning at the train station?"

"Can't we just drive there ourselves?" I scoffed, the train would take forever.

"No," Lucas said.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Well, the sedan isn't really fit for the kind of terrain we would be going over in order to get there. Plus, you never know when and if a place to gas up will be available. No one wants to get caught in the middle of wild country with flat tires or no gas."

I nodded my understanding.

[Chapter 962: A Gentleman's Agreement](#)

Lucas

As expected, Sasha was early. She stood up from the bench on the platform, having waited for me, and I waved a greeting.

She wore another sweater and a pair of jeans, but I still remembered what was underneath that sweater. I wondered if she was wearing another sports bra or if she'd chosen something more... frilly. Maybe lacy, partially see-through....

I paused and squeezed my eyes shut. We had a mission, and that mission did not include mentally undressing the delectable Sasha Wentley.

"How's Ian?" Sasha asked when I approached.

"Fine—insubordinate, as usual," I said with a smirk. Her hair was up today in a bouncy blond ponytail, exposing the long lines of a creamy neck. Moon Goddess help me.

Sasha smiled and it went straight to my groin. "He's funny."

"See if you still think that after he deliberately thrashes you around some potholes," I grumbled.

Sasha laughed, and that was even more tantalizing than her smile.

"All packed?" I asked, having to clear my throat a few times to regain the power of speech.

Sasha looked at me curiously, but nodded, indicating the large duffel sitting on the bench next to her.

"All packed."

"Great." I lifted her duffel, swinging it up over my shoulder with my own.

"Lucas!" Sasha said. "You don't have to—"

"Let's go." I cut her off.

Sasha gave an exasperated sigh and fell into step next to me. I held out our tickets to the porter and he took our bags, escorting us to our compartment.

"Ever been west before?" I asked Sasha as the porter stowed our bags over our heads.

"No," Sasha said, sitting down across from me. "Never."

"Beautiful countryside," I continued, settling myself so this time our legs were not touching—close, but not touching. I was still trying to figure out what impulse had me torturing myself rubbing legs with her all the way to the capital from the library site yesterday. It had been very unprofessional.

Why did I keep flirting with temptation?

Sasha noted the distance between our legs and I heard her sigh, turning her face to the window.

I didn't blame her for ignoring me. I'd have given me the cold shoulder, too, for constantly sending out so many mixed signals.

We were still sitting in silence when the train started moving, Sasha staring out the window.

I tried to think of something to talk about but gave up after the better part of an hour and took out a book instead. It was a history of the architecture of ancient Egoren temples. I figured I could try to beef up my knowledge a bit before meeting with Eliza. Maybe there would be a mention of other White Queen temples in the Dark Realm.

"Good book?" Sasha asked after a while.

I glanced up and saw she was now looking at me. "A bit dry, but yes," I answered.

"Can I read it when you're finished?" Sasha's voice was hopeful.

I smiled at her. "Of course."

If the heat in her eyes before she cast them down was anything to go by, my smile affected Sasha just as strongly as hers affected me.

"Do you ever go back to the Winter Forest?" I blurted, trying to break the tension.

Sasha looked back up. "Yes, sometimes. You?"

"I try to make it back for every Winter Solstice." I imagined the trees and clean, crisp air of our homeland.

Sasha looked wistful, imaging the same, I imagined. "I don't get back that often, but I do try to get back as often as possible."

"You miss home?" I asked.

"I like the bustle and innovation of the capital of the Dark Realm, but yes, sometimes I miss home," Sasha confessed.

"It was a great place to grow up," I said.

Sasha made a face, her eyes suddenly... angry and focused on me. "For some people."

She turned back to the window, but I put my hand on her knee. I wanted whatever this was out to rest between us once and for all. "Sasha, talk to me. What did I do that was so terrible?"

Sasha looked down at my hand, then at me. She sighed. "You really don't remember, do you?"

"I don't," I said. "Remind me."

"You were a bully, Lucas, you and your friends. And I was an easy target. Enough said?" Sasha replied.

I shook my head. "No, not enough said. Though whatever I did that I thought was teasing and you thought was torture, I am very sorry. I never wanted to hurt you."

"It's over now. We're grown-ups. Do we really have to rehash it?" Sasha complained.

"I think we do. Well, me and a sharp slap on the cheek think it might be a good idea," I reminded her with a slight smile.

Sasha groaned, covering her face with her hands. "Don't remind me."

"Kind of hard to forget," I said.

"My bracelet," she said stiffly.

I felt my brows furrow as I jogged my mind to recall a bracelet.

"I... I stepped on it," I said, feeling my stomach drop at the memory of her crying and begging for me to give it back to her. "Oh... Sasha I..."

I remembered thinking that the bracelet made of old leather and vines had to be a worthless piece of junk. But I could remember the way it crunched under my foot. It felt like glass breaking.

"I am so sorry," I said and she wiped away a tear.

I began to imagine the true value of the bracelet that must have been a precious heirloom.

"I wish I could go back and be a better kid," I mumbled.

"Me too," she agreed.

"Did you get in trouble for that?" I asked and watched her jaw tighten.

I didn't remember much about her mother, but she never seemed like a harsh parent. I swallowed as the air around us seemed to thin out, so I changed the subject.

"So... I've always wanted to ask... how do your dream dancer powers work?"

Sasha picked up on me trying to alleviate the tension between us, but still did not remove her hand from mine. "I see visions," Sasha said, "not that you didn't know that already. And I can manipulate water and air."

"Really?" I said.

Sasha wiggled the fingers of her free hand in the air, and a breeze blew over my book, turning the pages.

I stared, the oddest feeling coming over me. "Wow. I had no idea you were that powerful. I mean, I know your mother's kind of a seer... but she doesn't seem to be as strong as you. You're more like my Aunt Hannah."

"Mom's not as powerful as I am," Sasha confirmed. She looked uncomfortable all of a sudden.

"What? Is something wrong?" I asked, placing my other hand over hers so her smaller hand was sandwiched between my two larger ones.

"I just don't... really like... using or talking about my powers, because of how I got them," Sasha said haltingly.

Ah. Yes, the rumors. Sasha's father was a Lycannian man named Slate. Her mother had the misfortune of meeting him when she was sixteen, and he assaulted her.

It was the Lycennian line that was known to carry the same powers Sasha had, dating back to Carl, who would have been Sasha's grandfather.

Lycennian men were also known for their heartless brutality, and I could see why Sasha would want nothing to do with that connection.

"I understand," I responded softly. I tilted her chin up, seeing tears shimmer in her eyes. "Hey, none of it is your fault. And you use your powers or don't use them, when and how you want, as far as I'm concerned. As soon as we're done with that damned orb, you can decide never to use them again, if you want. I wouldn't blame you at all."

"Thank you, Lucas," Sasha whispered.

I wanted to kiss her. Every molecule in my body wanted to sway toward her and press my lips to those pouty, plump rosy red lips of hers.

Somehow, I managed to hold back.

We lapsed into silence, Sasha looking back out the window, and I went back to my book. But I flipped my hand over on her knee and threaded my fingers through hers so our hands were joined for the rest of the journey. I couldn't be any more professional than that.

When the train stopped, it was pelting rain. I took my button-down jacket off before taking up our bags, holding the shirt over our heads as we ran from the shabby platform and into the dirt streets of Levis. This was just the first leg of our journey, so we couldn't rely on finding any friends or relatives here.

An inn, the Moon Howl, squatted on one of the side streets, and we ducked inside the downstairs tavern.

Nostalgia looked just like this. Only Nostalgia was cultivated to be this way. The Moon Howl was the real deal. We were definitely not anywhere near the capital anymore.

A man who must have been the innkeeper came out from behind the bar. "Table for two?" he asked, an apron stretched tight over his roly-poly gut.

"Yes, sir," I replied. "And two rooms for the night, if you don't mind."

"I don't mind," the innkeeper said slowly, "it's just that this rain has driven everyone inside. I only have one room left." He glanced at Sasha. "With the one bed."

"I see." I looked at the door, wondering if Sasha would catch her death if we ventured back out into the rain and made for another inn.

"Only inn in town," the innkeeper said as though reading my mind. He was smiling at Sasha and me now in a way I didn't like at all.

I put a rain-soaked arm around Sasha, pulling her against my wet T-shirt. "I guess we'll have to make do, then," I replied politely, though there was a warning growl in my tone.

The innkeeper wisely stopped undressing Sasha with his eyes and named a price.

I knew it was at least double what the room was worth, but with this rain going on, it wasn't as though I had much of a choice. I handed over a few gold coins, and the innkeeper gave me a rusty key.

"Enjoy," he winked as he waved over a buxom barmaid to show us to a table.

I looked at Sasha, who'd huddled closer into me when the innkeeper's gaze fell on her again. The growl I gave this time was the last warning that man was going to get, and he knew it.

Prudently, he returned to his post behind the bar.

I kept my arm around Sasha as we followed the waitress to a small table in the corner of the crowded tavern. Like the room, it was the only one that was open.

"I'll get you the stew," the waitress said once we sat down. She tried shoving her boobs in my face but realized quickly there was only one woman in this place who could hold my attention. "Will you be wanting ale?"

"Yes," Sasha and I both said together.

The waitress nodded and headed back to the kitchen.

"So... no menu choices?" Sasha tried breaking the tension.

"Not this far away from the city," I said.

Sasha nodded and we fell silent again.

I stared into her eyes.

She stared into mine.

The air burned between us.

I had no idea how we were going to keep this professional anymore.

[Chapter 963: A Bed for Two](#)

Sasha

"All day?" I gaped at Lucas. "We have to wait here all day tomorrow before they can send a car for us?"

"Unless you want to walk...." He chuckled over his stew, popping a large bite of beef into his mouth. "I just managed to catch the post before it left. They might not get my message until the morning.

Considering that I am giving them little notice, that is no time really. How did you think we were going to get there with the train tracks stopping here in Leviss?"

"Haven't they ever heard of a bus?" I mumbled, stirring my own stew. I frowned as a chicken leg, foot and all, surfaced through the sludge.

"It's supposed to be lucky," Lucas winked at me.

"Waiting all day in the middle of nowhere for a ride?" I asked, poking the chicken foot with my spoon.

"No, getting the chicken leg. Are you going to eat it?" He stopped my spoon poking with his own.

"Umm... I'd rather not. Is it impolite to—"

Lucas scooped my chicken leg free and gnawed the meat off the bone. "Your loss," he grinned.

I got the impression, though, given the frown on the buxom waitress's face, that Lucas had just saved me from a major social faux pas. "Thank you," I mouthed.

Lucas's eyes twinkled and he set the bone aside. "Isn't it exciting, going west?"

"I don't know," I mumbled again. "If it wasn't a trip to stop me from being sucked into the void of time, it might be."

"The further west we get from the capital, the less developed the villages become," Lucas explained. I figured he was doing his best to keep my mind off of the possibility of disappearing again. "It is a bit inconvenient to have to wait on a car. But otherwise, we'd be twiddling our thumbs for who knows how long before Eliza would be free to come to the capital."

I sighed heavily.

"It'll be okay, princess." Lucas smiled at me.

My toes curled, and the warmth that suffused my stomach had nothing to do with stew.

I cleared my throat. "We should probably talk about sleeping arrangements."

"Sleeping arrangements?" Lucas said.

"Yes. Now, I am more than happy to take the floor...." I suggested.

"Sasha. We're both grown adults. I think we can sleep in a bed together without having problems," Lucas replied.

I swallowed. "Depends on your definition of 'problems.'"

Lucas reached across the table and covered my hand with his. "Nothing you don't want to happen will ever happen when you're with me, Sasha. I promise, you have nothing to worry about."

The warmth in my stomach spread to other places, but I managed a nod. It really was silly to think two mature adults couldn't share a bed without... issues. "Okay. We can give it a try."

"Good to hear," Lucas said. He looked at my bowl of stew and raised an eyebrow. "Are you gonna finish that?"

"Help yourself," I said, trading my bowl for his empty one.

"Chicken leg did you in, huh? Don't worry. There shouldn't be any in breakfast," Lucas responded.

He quickly finished the remaining stew and dropped a few coins on the table. He patted his belly then pulled me to my feet.

Since the waitress was still glaring death at me, I decided her problem might have less to do with the stew and more with my proximity to Lucas.

Lucas followed my gaze, then chuckled and wrapped an arm around me, pulling me tight to his side.

"Don't pull away. I'm hoping this little display means she won't be glowering at us over breakfast."

"Not interested?" I whispered, a little furry jealous beastie poking me in the gut. I was not nearly as well-endowed as she was.

"Yes, but not in her," Lucas murmured, ushering me towards the stairs.

My cheeks got hot, and only got hotter when Lucas swung the door to our upstairs room open.

All hopes of maybe creating a pillow barrier between us were dashed. The bed was small... no, tiny, very tiny. How it was meant to hold even just Lucas boggled my mind. The two of us...?

"I really can sleep on the floor," I wheezed.

Lucas also swallowed, but shook his head firmly. "No... No, no," he said. "We can do this. It's just a matter of some creative arranging."

I could just imagine the creative arranging he was thinking about. I was having visions of the same. Still, I was just as determined as he was to prove we could be professional, mature adults. "Okay."

Lucas gave a decisive nod.

We both looked at our bags that had been set down next to the bed. I wondered if a T-shirt and boxers was going to be enough armor against Lucas Black.

"I packed light," Lucas explained before I could say anything. "If you don't mind, I'll just wear my boxers. Sorry, I wasn't expecting...."

"No, that's fine," I said, my mouth dry. "I'll—"

It was then I noticed the ties on my bag were different than I had tied them. "Um... Lucas? Do you think our bags have been tampered with?"

Lucas frowned and set me behind him before approaching our bags. "I swear to the Moon Goddess, if one of them got the orb...."

I shivered. "I doubt it. It still feels very present to me."

Still, Lucas checked his bag and handed me mine.

He gave a sharp nod of approval when he saw everything he'd packed was still there.

When I opened my bag, however, I scowled at the rumpled mess my neatly folded clothes were in.

I began to feel sick to my stomach, and felt my face turn sour as I rummaged through and figured out what was missing.

"What's wrong?" Lucas growled.

"Someone went through my bag and took... all of my bras and underwear."

I looked inside again and stared. Then I snatched the bag from Lucas and began rummaging. But they were, indeed, gone, right down to the boxers and shirt I slept in. Of course, a shirt that said, "Every Day is Pajama Day" was probably just a bit too obvious for whatever pervert had ransacked my bag.

"Sasha?" Lucas asked.

I dropped the bag onto the floor and groaned. "They're all gone. Including my pajamas."

Lucas growled again. "I'll bet the innkeeper might know where I can find your underwear...." He cracked his knuckles and headed for the door.

I stopped him with a hand on his arm as he passed. "It's late," I sighed. "And I don't want us getting kicked out in the rain. Besides, if he's had his hands or... other things on them... I'm not so sure I want them back."

Lucas grimaced and looked at me sympathetically. "Good point."

I wrapped my arms awkwardly around myself. "Um... so... that's going to leave me in a pair of panties and my bra for tonight... um... I really can sleep on the floor...."

"I have plenty of T-shirts you can borrow." Lucas said and dug one out for me.

Lucas and I turned our backs to each other by silent accord to strip down. I was unreasonably glad I'd worn some good underwear, not something ratty. It also wasn't too lacy or revealing.

I took my bra off and slipped into the cozy comfort of Lucas's T-shirt. It slipped off of one shoulder and fell to mid thigh.

We both faced the bed at the same time, pointedly not looking at each other until we were finished. A slight smile touched his lips.

"What?" I asked.

"I like my T-shirt on you."

I blushed and looked him over. Sweet mercy of the Goddess, he was perfect.

"What?" he asked as he watched the changing expression on my face.

"Nothing," I said breathlessly.

"I'll get in first," Lucas said, finally deciding the logistics. "You can lay on my chest. That's the only way this is going to work."

"Okay," I squeaked, trying very hard not to stare at Lucas's perfect ass in his boxers as he climbed into bed.

He settled in and opened his arms, and I walked toward him and gingerly lay down on top of him.

"You won't break me, Sasha. Get comfortable," he said.

"Alright...."

I moved my hips and wiggled my legs until I was situated to one side of his broad chest with one hip resting on the mattress and my leg cushioned on his thigh. I kept one arm tucked close to me while the other draped across his abdomen.

Lucas closed his arms around me, and we let the warmth of our bodies mingle without saying a word for several minutes.

I finally relaxed my head onto his chest, closing my eyes as his intoxicating scent completely engulfed me.

I was sure he could feel my n****s peak beneath his shirt as I laid on his chest, but then I could feel his erection against my hip, so I figured we were even. True to his word, though, Lucas did nothing but stroke my arm a bit.

Casting around for something to make the situation less awkward, my gaze settled on scars on Lucas's chest in the low gas streetlight filtering in through the window. I touched them, tracing the angry, whitened lines. "How did you get these?" I asked.

Lucas brought a hand up to stop me fondling his scars, instead bringing my fingers to his lips, then tucking my hand against his shoulder. "A fight with a rogue—before the northern library project. I'm just cursed to get into scrapes with rogues, I guess."

I shuddered. "Don't say that. The universe might hear you."

"It doesn't hurt to say the truth out loud," Lucas shrugged.

"Still, I'd rather you not tempt fate and get hurt," I said.

Lucas stroked my cheek, tipping my chin up to look him in the eyes. "Only one person in this whole world can hurt me, princess."

I blushed, and Lucas's head came down as mine came up, our lips touched so sweetly I was afraid to breathe.

Then Lucas pulled back, kissing my forehead and thumbing the scar on the underside of my arm. "Where did you get this, princess?"

Hot and bothered, frustrated and relieved, I turned my attention to the star-shaped mark he was stroking. "I was born with it," I confessed.

"That's interesting. It feels star-shaped," Lucas said.

"It is," I replied, swallowing as I shifted to move the scar out of his reach. "It's like a mark...."

"Mark?" he asked, looking confused and I pulled back. I knew he must be thinking of mate marks, but I was at a loss for words on how to explain the superstitions my mother wanted to protect me from with that bracelet he stomped all over.

Memories of him as a red-faced boy crushing my bracelet rushed back to me.

I felt my body stiffen against him. Everything in the atmosphere shifted as a chill ran over me.

He held me tighter.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I said as I pulled away from him. "I should just sleep on the floor."

"Wait, why?"

"Because, this is so... confusing."

He nodded his head and let me get up, but only so he could get up as well.

"You take the bed," he said, leading me back to the bed and sitting me down. His gentle touch and manners left me speechless. He avoided my eyes, but I could see something I said deeply affected him.

Before I could insist on taking the floor again, he stepped back and shifted into his wolf.

"Lucas, I didn't mean to...."

He shook his head and nudged me until I lay and then circled a spot in the floor under the street light before lying down.

Suddenly the tiny bed felt way too big.

Chapter 964: Divine Discomfort

Sasha

I woke up alone in bed. I turned over and I looked at the floor. Lucas's wolf was gone and the room was empty.

"Lucas?" I whispered uncertainly into the hazy morning light.

I sat up slowly, feeling a wave of uneasiness wash over me. Memories of the previous night flooded my mind, and my body tensed at the thought of Lucas leaving me here and not coming back.

I shook my head. He wouldn't do that.

The door to our room opened and closed, and I yanked the blanket up to my chin.

But it was just Lucas, carrying a neatly-folded stack of my underthings. "We can burn them later," he grunted. "But I wasn't going to let that asshole keep them."

I noted his knuckles were cracked and bruised, and I felt a bit of smug pride. Lucas had just beaten the crap out of that weird, awful stalker pervert innkeeper. There was something very satisfying about that.

I looked at him gratefully as I remembered the way things had ended between us last night. I opened my mouth to apologize.

But suddenly Lucas whipped the blanket off the bed and I made an indignant sound. He shrugged and simply took the blanket and wrapped it around the undergarments and night clothes in a tight parcel before setting them in my bag.

"I don't want you touching that," Lucas said.

It was almost a command, but one I was more than happy to obey. "Thanks."

"You're welcome," Lucas replied. "Though speaking of welcomes, we might have just worn ours out. Get dressed. We can go wait for our ride in town. It's a nice day."

Lucas seemed to have forgotten about last night, and so could I.

I wriggled out of bed and pulled on clean pants and another sweater. The ones from yesterday were still soaked, despite being left out to dry last night.

Lucas had the same idea. He was wearing a crisp new shirt and form-hugging trousers.

I sighed inwardly. It really wasn't fair when he insisted on looking so tempting all the time.

Lucas picked up my bag and his and we headed out of the inn. I noted, with no small amount of satisfaction, that the innkeeper was cringing behind the bar, more black-and-blue than he was flesh-colored.

We took a short stroll through town and bought a few quaint trinkets.

As we made our way through the market, I couldn't help but notice the way Lucas moved. With every step, he exuded confidence and power. His broad shoulders and chiseled jawline turned heads wherever we went.

We found a small café and decided to grab some breakfast before our ride arrived. As we sat across from each other, sipping our coffee, I felt an uncomfortable tension settle over us.

"Lucas, about last night...." I began, needing to clear the air and unsure of how to broach the subject.

He cut me off with a look. "Don't worry about it, Sasha."

"But...."

Before I could utter an apology, he plopped a velvet box on the table between us.

I looked at him confused. "For me?"

He nodded and I reached over to pick it up. When had he bought this?

My fingers grazed the soft surface of the box. I could feel the weight of it in my hands, the anticipation building up inside me. My heart hammered in my chest as I flipped open the lid, my eyes widening in surprise at what was inside.

It was a necklace.

The gold chain necklace lay nestled in the satin lining, a glimmering, perfectly-cut emerald latched to it. Its size was modest, but the shine was as bright as crystal.

"I know it doesn't make up for what happened to the bracelet. I'll never be able to replace it. But, I hope to show you over time that I am in no way like the kid I once was."

"I know," I said as I took the necklace from the box. I held it out to him. "Help me put it on?"

Taking the necklace, he rose from his chair and stood behind me. I held my hair out of the way and felt his warm fingers graze over my neck and shoulders pulling the ends and clasping them together.

I felt the weight of the emerald resting in the middle of my chest and didn't know what else to say.

Our meal came, and I was glad to see it was much more appetizing than the inn keeper's gruel.

When we were done, Lucas figured it was time for the car to arrive, so we settled on a bench near the inn to wait.

And wait.

And wait.

After several hours, a postal delivery arrived at the inn asking for Lucas Black. We hurried over.

"Are you Lucas Black?" he asked.

Lucas nodded showing his ID and the postman handed over a letter.

"It's from Eliza," Lucas said as he tore it open. He read it and cursed. "Their car won't be able to come until tomorrow."

Tomorrow? I groaned and shifted my eyes back to the inn—another night in one room with one bed?

Lucas groaned. "The Moon Howl is the only inn in town?"

"Yessir," the postman said.

"Seems we're going to be here for the night."

I winced. "Still not wearing any of those things you wrapped in the blanket."

"Wrapped in a blanket?" the postman inquired.

"Yeah. Your innkeeper has sticky fingers for women's undergarments," Lucas grumped.

The postman made a disgusted sound. "Not again."

"Again?" Lucas echoed, a dangerous edge to his voice.

"He's been warned, sir. I'm taking this one straight to the mayor," the postman sniffed. He looked at Lucas's bag, a frown on his face. "Something in there smells funny."

"Uh..." I began.

"That's why we're going to see Eliza Crimson in the Midnight Sun pack. We found an artifact north of the capital we need a scholar to look at," Lucas explained, putting a hand on my knee.

"Really?" the postman said excitedly. "What kind of artifact?"

"Religious, we think," Lucas said. Then his eyes lit up. "You don't happen to have a priest or priestess around here, do you? I figure if we're stuck here another day...."

The postman made a face. "Yeah, there's a priestess, but probably not the kind you're looking for."

Lucas looked at me and shrugged. "Can't hurt to try."

"Alright, then. She lives at the edge of town, in the woods, really. You just take the road up that way and turn left at the fork," the postman said, pointing.

"Thanks," Lucas responded. He handed the postman a few coins. "For your trouble."

"Thank you, sir," the postman said, pocketing the coins.

Lucas pulled me up by the elbow and began motoring us down the path.

"Are you sure it was such a good idea to tell that man so much about our—er—quest?" I asked, glancing back.

"I didn't go into detail," Lucas said. "Besides, we've already wasted half a day. If there's someone here who can help, maybe we can just catch the last train home and not spend another night under that disgusting man's roof."

I gave that some thought, then nodded. "I'm all for that."

"I thought you might be," Lucas replied.

This town was smaller than the one where the northern library was located. As such, it took very little time at all to get to the priestess's hut.

A feeling of unease washed over me even before Lucas knocked on her door.

Wizened and cranky, an elderly woman opened the door. "What?" she demanded.

"Sorry to bother you," Lucas said, even as I started tugging on his arm, "but we were told we could find a priestess near here."

"I'm the priestess," the old woman grunted. "What's your business?"

"We had something we were hoping you could look at—" Lucas began.

"Which religion did you say you were a priestess of?" I interrupted him.

"I didn't," the old woman responded with a harrumph.

I looked at Lucas, who was eyeing me curiously. "Would you mind telling us?"

The old woman glanced between us and finally gave the terse response, "Lycoanian."

Something about what she said didn't ring true, so I followed that up with, "Would you mind if we visited your temple?"

"You want to visit the temple," the priestess grumbled. "Of course you do. Because making a little old lady walk a mile into the woods with an arthritic hip is a great way to build rapport with Lycaon."

"Please?" I asked innocently before Lucas could chivalrously intercede.

"Ugh." The old woman rolled her eyes and closed her door.

Just when I was thinking she's shut us out for good, and was feeling rather relieved about it, the old woman reappeared with a shawl around her shoulders. "Come with me," she snapped, starting into the woods.

Lucas gave me a stern look as we walked after her. "Is this really necessary?"

"Something's wrong," I whispered.

"What? What's wrong?" Lucas asked.

"With... her," I said.

Lucas frowned, then slid an arm around my shoulders. "We'll go to the temple and see what's what."

"I think we should just go," I responded anxiously.

"Let's just... give it a chance," Lucas sighed. "We don't know enough about her yet to completely dismiss the chance she could help us. Also, we did get her out with her arthritic hip...."

I pushed my hair behind my ear. "Alright," I reluctantly agreed.

Lucas kept his arm around me all the way to the temple, a structure that looked ancient and disused. It was covered in thick vines that almost completely obscured the door, and spindly trees had fallen on and around it.

Finally, Lucas was looking about as unconvinced as I was. But he soldiered us through the temple entrance to a space covered with leaves and debris. There was an altar at one end, but nothing else denoting it was a temple.

"So... not many worshippers?" Lucas asked.

"Enough." The priestess looked as though she'd sucked on something foul. She sucked her wrinkled lips, then gestured around. "Here you go. Now, if you're here to worship, go right ahead. I'm going home."

"Actually...." Lucas said, glancing down at me. "We were hoping you could help us with something. An artifact..."

He pulled a wad of silk fabric out of his sack, and I knew inside was the orb. Before he revealed it, I put a hand on his arm.

“Actually, we're good. Just sightseeing,” I smiled, hoping my voice didn't reveal my nervousness.

Lucas seemed to pick up on it and shoved the orb, silk and all, back into his sack.

The old woman's sharp eyes followed Lucas's movements closely. “You've found something,” she said eagerly. “something of great importance.”

“Not really,” Lucas replied, and I wondered if he was as creeped out by her eagerness as I was. “Well, it's a lovely temple. We'll be going now....”

Lucas took my hand and started leading me back to the vine-covered entrance.

The old woman grabbed my wrist. “Don't be so hasty—” She stopped, her cloudy blue eyes going wide. “Dream dancer....” she breathed.

“Eep,” came the frightened sound out of my mouth.

Lucas wrenched me away from the old woman, almost toppling her. “I don't think that's any of your business. Come on, Sasha....”

“Please,” the old woman begged, hobbling after us. “I've never met a dream dancer before. I have so many questions....”

Lucas picked up the pace, and I was almost running to keep up with him.

We quickly outran the old woman, heading back to, well, the only inn in town.

When the innkeeper blustered over, likely to throw us out, Lucas threw enough coins at him to mobilize a small army. “Key,” Lucas said tersely.

The innkeeper fished in his apron and handed it over. “Same room,” he said, collecting his bounty off the floor.

Lucas took the stairs two at a time, dragging me with him. He shoved me into the room ahead of him, then closed and locked the door behind us. “We'll stay here until the car comes for us tomorrow.”

“I want to leave now,” I said, hugging myself, feeling a great sense of unease.

“Sasha, our only option would be to hop the train back to the capital,” Lucas replied, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Something is wrong. Something is really wrong here. We should go home. If that's our only option, we should go home,” I fretted. I started pushing my hair behind my ear, but Lucas completed the action for me, smoothing a lock of hair back.

“Sasha,” he said, cupping my cheek. “We need to know what this orb is doing to you. We can't find that out in the capital.”

I placed my hands on Lucas's chest. “Please, Lucas, please let's just g—”

There was yelling and scraping downstairs.

Our heads snapped toward the door.

"Dream dancer!" was roared up the stairs.

It wasn't the old woman.

"Oh. Oh no," I gasped. "Oh no...."

"f**k," Lucas said as there was pounding on our door. It shook on its hinges.

"Lucas, what do we...?" I asked.

Lucas pulled me front to back against his chest and put a hand over my mouth. "I'm thinking," he whispered.

The door began to splinter.

"Lucas?"

Lucas looked at the window.

"You've got to be kidding me," I gasped.

[Chapter 965: Breaking Out](#)

Lucas

I wasn't kidding. A claw reached through a slit down the middle of the door.

Time was not on our side. I ran to the window but found it was swelled shut in its frame. It was something that should have been replaced decades ago.

A burning yellow eye and snapping jaws were now visible through a break in the door.

I was going to have to break the window.

"Do you trust me?" I asked Sasha, who was already holding a water pitcher to defend herself.

"Yes," Sasha said, briefly looking over at me.

"Put that down. Come over here," I barked.

Sasha looked at me as though I'd lost my mind, but when the door finally blew right off its hinges, she dropped the pitcher and walked right into my embrace.

"You'd better be sure about this," she warned.

"I hope so." I dragged her over to the window with me, then kept her tight in one arm while slamming my elbow through the glass.

I felt some of the jagged edges catch on my flesh as I took Sasha out of the room. I tried to kick the last of the glass shards down, but I feared she would also have some cuts and scratches to show for this act of insanity.

We tumbled into the bushes below. I popped my head up, looking briefly in the window of the inn. The priestess was there, directing five or six shifter thugs.

"You were right about the priestess," I panted to Sasha before grabbing her wrist and hauling her out of the bushes and down the road.

"You think so?"

I shot her a look and noted Sasha had had the Goddess-given brains to grab the silk-covered orb. For my part, I started to shift as we ran, joints popping, bones elongating.

My clothes tore, and Sasha started having trouble keeping up. "Jump on my back," I ordered her, stopping suddenly.

"Lucas—"

"NOW!!!" I roared, the last thing I said before I'd shifted completely.

Sasha gripped my fur and slung herself over my back, hanging on tight with her legs.

I surged forward, taking us far away from the inn, from the town of Leviss itself. I heard howling behind us and redoubled my efforts. But I had a passenger and the shifter thugs did not. It was a losing battle.

There had to be something... the train!

By some miracle, the train to the capital was heading down the nearby tracks, away from the station. I bolted for it, my claws digging up great clumps of dirt.

I could feel the orb pressed hard against my neck. Sasha curled her hands more tightly into my fur as I approached the train, loping along beside it.

Since she had no wolf, I could only hope she understood what I wanted her to do.

"Lucas, you're insane! I can't jump!" Sasha screamed over the howls that were fast catching up with us.

I snarled at her.

"I'm not going to make it," Sasha yelled.

The door of the train car opened, and a man leaned out, holding a hand out to Sasha. With little other choice, she grabbed it and he hauled her onto the train.

I leaped up behind her, accidentally knocking them both to the floor. The orb went flying.

The man got up first, while I shifted on the floor. He pulled the train door closed, stopping our pursuers from hopping aboard.

The train picked up speed. The other shifters didn't stand a chance.

I sat up, naked, breathing hard.

Sasha was scrambling across the floor, and I realized she was looking for the orb. It had rolled free of the silk I'd used to bind it.

A glimmer of white shone from beneath a fire extinguisher. Sasha dove for it as it began moving again with the pitch of the train.

Her hands closed on it, and she stood, giving me a relieved smile.

I smiled back and opened my mouth to congratulate us on a successful evasion of certain death, or to ask the helpful young man who he was.

Instead, my jaw dropped as the orb in Sasha's hands turned a brilliant blue and began to glow.

"No," I said, reaching for her.

With a look of horror on her face, Sasha disappeared, my fingers meeting nothing but air.

I woke in the lumpy, narrow bed in the inn, panicked, but not terribly surprised that Sasha wasn't there. Her bag was gone, and—I rolled out of bed to check, even though I knew—the orb was gone as well.

There was a knock at the door, and the odious innkeeper popped his head in with a jangle of keys and a wide smile. "Rise and shine! The truck will be arriving just outside the post office at any minute."

I wanted to growl at him, but then, in this reality, he'd done nothing wrong. Sasha didn't exist.

At least this time I could avoid seeing the old priestess and maybe actually have some time in Midnight Sun Pack territory. Orb or no orb, Eliza should be able to tell me something.

After all, there was nothing else to do but pace and panic until Sasha returned—if she returned.

I shook the dark thoughts away and gave the innkeeper a tight smile. "Thank you. I'll be on my way now."

The innkeeper nodded and closed the door.

Not five minutes later, I was sitting outside the post office, waiting for the truck and hoping it hadn't broken an axle this time.

Whatever this timeline was, I could see my path would not be impeded. A cloud of dust announced the arrival of a truck... packed tightly with people.

I groaned. I'd be sitting in the back with the dust, it seemed. Clutching my pack, I handed over my ticket and climbed in, wedging my knees almost to my ears in what tiny space there was left.

Dirt made the air nearly unbreathable, but I soldiered through the many hours riding with my tailbone on the wheel well.

When we finally reached Crimson Village, I was hobbled over like an old man, rubbing my lower spine as I got out of the truck.

"Rough ride?" a familiar voice asked.

I turned and grinned at Jared. "You have no idea."

Jared let the dust settle a bit, then walked forward, clapping me on the shoulder. "It's good to see you, even if it is some sort of emergency. I'm surprised you came alone."

"I didn't," I sighed, and braced myself for the inevitable.

Jared looked around me at the disappearing truck and people who were shuffling away. "Umm... your letter did say you were coming alone... is there someone else here I should be rounding up?"

"Not right now. We'll see what happens later," I mumbled, falling into step beside Jared as he led me to the home he shared with Eliza.

They'd added on since I'd been there, I noted as we approached the cozy cottage. "Expecting more little ones?" I teased.

"Always," Jared laughed. "Now, what do you mean about someone showing up later?"

"She would have shown up now except for the orb," I said, all teasing gone.

"Oh yes, you did mention some artifact that you wanted Eliza to look at," Jared replied with a nod. "Can I see it?"

"It's gone for now," I explained.

Jared blinked. "For... now?"

"Sasha Wentley has it, wherever it's taken her," I continued, knowing I sounded like a raving lunatic by this point.

"Who?" Jared frowned.

"I did write ahead, though I'm sure that letter changed as well. That orb pulls her out of time, like she never existed, and disappears along with her. It's the second time this has happened. I'm just hoping it brings her back." I stepped over the threshold of the cottage to see Eliza standing in the living room.

Some unspoken communication passed between Eliza and Jared, probably something along the lines of "this guy is nuts." Eliza's gaze went from welcoming to wary.

"You don't have the artifact?" she said.

Ah, good. A little wolfy communication to save me repeating myself. "It's gone, along with Sasha."

"Sasha... Wentley," Eliza responded slowly.

I turned back to Jared. "Good memory."

"Yes, well, it seemed relevant. I was hoping my Eliza might know who you were talking about," Jared said.

Eliza shook her head. "Not a clue."

"I kind of figured. It was just like this last time, too. You won't know Sasha. No one will." I paced the floor, wondering how long Sasha would be gone this time.

"Uh-huh," Eliza murmured as she and Jared watched me wear a path on their wood floor.

"I know how I sound," I sighed. "For me, it's yesterday, and Sasha has completely disappeared with that damn orb. This time it turned blue instead of white. Goddess only knows where it's taken her. I mean,

well, last time it took her to the Goddess, so that's a possibility. Maybe she'll be less cryptic this time and we can figure out what to do with the damn orb and then chuck it out of our lives forever."

Jared began to chuckle. I snapped my head in his direction. "What?" I asked peevishly.

"This girl must be real, cousin, because you've got it ba-ad," Jared said.

"Jared, do be quiet," Eliza cut in before I could blow up at him. "Lucas is here because of some kind of emergency. And if it has some poor girl disappearing and reappearing all the time, then that really is a serious problem, especially for her."

Something unspoken passed between them again, and Jared finally threw up his hands. "Fine. Fine. I'll go weed the flowerbed. You two figure this out." He stormed off.

Eliza turned back to me, concerned. "Now, Lucas, this is all very jumbled. Please start from the beginning."

It took the better part of the morning and afternoon to tell the tale and to answer all of Eliza's questions as best I could. Snacks and drinks came and went, and I took no notice of whether it was a servant or Jared himself bringing them.

When she stopped asking questions and just went silent, I found myself fidgeting impatiently with a delicate teacup. I didn't even remember drinking the contents dry.

"So?" I asked before five minutes had passed.

"I'm thinking," Eliza said, raising a finger to shut me up. She looked out the window, and I could see angry clumps of dirt flying through the air as Jared "weeded." It must have been code between them for "I'm going to go terrorize the garden so I don't destroy something in our house."

I rubbed the back of my neck. "Any chance you could think a little faster?"

"If it lasts a whole day, Lucas, we still have plenty of time before your Sasha reappears," Eliza reminded me. She sighed. "Speaking of which, this orb clearly has something to do with time. Maybe every time it takes Sasha, it also pushes you into a timeline where she doesn't exist." She patted my hand. "I can see how that would be very disturbing for you."

"I just want it to stop happening," I grumbled, not quite comfortable with where she was going with her sympathy.

"I'm sure you do... and Sasha, no less," Eliza said. "But it seems the Goddess has given her some kind of mission. I can't tell you any more about the orb. I can't think of anything like it having been mentioned in our history books, nor have I ever encountered anything like it in any of my own research. But that could just be because, in this timeline, the orb itself also does not exist. It's hard to say. Maybe you could find that priestess again and get her to tell you more?"

"Pretty sure we burned that bridge," I grunted.

Eliza squeezed my hand. "Not in this timeline."

"You're right. You're right!" I said, standing suddenly. "I need to get back to Leviss."

[Chapter 966: The Disappearing Act](#)

Lucas

I ended up riding the wheel well again on the way back to Leviss. Between the dust and the certain thudding injury to my tailbone, I was just glad I hadn't pissed off the innkeeper in this timeline. If Sasha's absence went on for more than a day, I didn't want to have to sleep on the ground.

Still, I ignored the Moon Howl when I passed it, making determined tracks for the priestess's home.

The old hag looked just the same when she opened the door in the setting sun, her wizened face pinched with displeasure as she eyed me on her doorstep.

"Well?" she snapped.

"Forgive me, madam, but I was told you are a priestess?" I said politely, even though my memory of her reaching for my Sasha made me want to snap her twiggy little neck.

"I am," the priestess grumbled. "What do you want?"

"I want...." How was I supposed to put this without raising the same suspicions I had before? At the very least, she was going to think I was a raving lunatic. At worst, she might have some ability to hurt my Sasha, wherever she was.

Inspiration struck.

"I was hoping I could go to the temple to pray," I said quickly. If I could find an orb in one wreck, maybe I could find an explanation in another.

Muttering under her breath, the old priestess slammed her door shut. I waited, and sure enough, she reappeared with her shawl. "I hate visitors to Leviss, I really do. Disturbing poor old ladies from their well-earned afternoon rest...."

"I am sorry." I tried to sound contrite but was secretly smug. That old b***h didn't deserve any kind of peace.

"Mhm, yes, they're always sorry. Tourists." The old priestess continued complaining all the way through the woods and to the ancient, vine-covered temple.

I pretended to look around, like a tourist, just admiring the place. The old woman watched me like a hawk as I wandered through the leaf and twig debris, scouring the faded etchings and paint on the walls for some clue as to what Sasha and I were dealing with.

An iridescent blue dot caught my eye—a jewel set in a place that had either long been ransacked clean or hadn't had such precious pieces to begin with.

The hieroglyphics around it, however, were nothing but jibberish to me. I couldn't read a word.

"This is new," I remarked, pointing at the round, blue... sapphire? "What do the words say?"

"Are you going to pray or not?" the old priestess harped, though her eyes had narrowed to suspicious slits.

"Just curious about the temple is all," I replied cheerfully.

"I doubt that," the old woman grunted. She shuffled over to the wall, but instead of translating the symbols, she poked me in the chest. "What do you know about the orb?" she demanded.

"Orb?" I widened my eyes. "What orb?"

Then the old priestess actually sniffed me... like a dog. "You smell of magic... and dream dancer." She gripped my chin and turned my face this way and that. "But you are not one. The jewel turned blue today. But you know that already, don't you?"

I snatched her wrist and squeezed just hard enough for it to be a warning to her. "What do you know about the orb?"

The old priestess smirked at me. "A fair bit. But I won't tell you a thing unless you bring me the orb and the dream dancer."

I squeezed harder, her brittle bones creaking. "I think you should just tell me what the f**k is going on."

The old priestess sniffed the air, either pretending or actually unfazed by my grip or my threats. "Are you the mate, then? Hmm... yes, the prophecy... soon it will be revealed to all," she cackled. "But not yet... not yet. We have waited so many lifetimes, and now, she comes. The power will return."

I gave her a shake. "Will you talk sense, woman?!"

The old priestess just laughed in my face. Then she brought up her other hand and blew something pink into my eyes before I could stop her.

I stumbled back, releasing her as my eyes burned. "What did you—?"

The air swirled between us, and I felt reality begin to change.

"She comes," the old woman said gleefully. "The chosen one comes."

I grabbed the orb as it dropped from Sasha's hands. The man who'd helped us grabbed Sasha before she hit the floor of the rolling train.

"What's that?" he asked, staring at the now-blue orb in my hands.

I held it away from him. "Don't let it touch her."

"Well, obviously not. She held it for five seconds and keeled over," the man scoffed.

I hunted around the floor and snatched up the silk, wrapping it securely around the orb. "Have you got a bag? Backpack? Something?"

"Yeah, sure," the man said.

I shoved the orb at him and held out my arms for Sasha.

Careful that they didn't even brush her, the man and I made the trade. I stood, stark naked, with Sasha in my arms while the man, without questioning me, grabbed a bag from a nearby compartment and shoved the orb all the way to the bottom.

There was the risk he'd run off with it, but honestly, at this point, I almost wished he would. My Sasha was out cold, her skin pale and clammy. Something had happened to her, something I was sure I had that blasted orb to thank for.

"You'd better come in my compartment. They're checking tickets now, and I get the sense you two might not have any," the young man said.

"You have the right idea," I responded, and I followed him into the compartment. I sat down with Sasha in my lap, her cheek pillowed against my bare shoulder.

"I'm Gage," the red-haired, green-eyed young man said, sliding the compartment door closed.

"Thank you, Gage, for everything," I replied, holding out a hand and shaking his.

"Yeah, you're going to be thanking me for a set of clothes, too," Gage murmured, looking me up and down.

I winced. "That would be greatly appreciated, yes."

There was a knock on the compartment door, and I flinched.

"Tickets please," came a gruff voice.

Gage opened up his purse and pulled out a few gold coins. "And train tickets."

"That, too," I agreed as the door slid open.

The ticket checker glared at me. "Sir, we may not have a strict dress code on this train, but we do have the expectation that you are dressed."

"Working on it, sorry," I said, gently settling Sasha next to me.

"Hmph. Tickets?" the ticket man huffed.

Gage held out a handful of coins, more than enough for silence and discretion.

The man looked at them, nodded, then pocketed the coins and produced two new tickets for Sasha and me. "You have a good day now, sirs," he said, and he wandered off.

"I'm good for it," I told Gage. "Just as soon as we get back to the capital."

"I kind of figured," Gage grinned.

"Lucas Black. I'm a Royal Engineer," I said as Gage fished in his bag, then pulled out a simple shirt, trousers, and boxers.

"Royal Engineer this far out? With a pretty girl and some weird globe? This has got to be a good story," Gage responded, handing me the clothes.

I made sure Sasha was in a stable position before standing. Seeing a blanket on an overhead luggage rack, I tugged it down and tucked it around Sasha before pulling on Gage's clothes. "You'd better believe it," I said.

I wasn't sure whether Gage believed it or not, but he certainly was engrossed as I explained Sasha's and my plight.

"Wow," he whistled when I finished. "If I were you, I'd drop that orb down the deepest well I could find."

"Don't think I'm not tempted," I grunted. "I certainly would if I wasn't afraid the cursed thing would call her down after it."

Gage shuddered. "Yeah. That would be bad."

Sasha's head lolled away from the window, but she did not wake. I gently tucked her chin against my shoulder and smoothed the hair away from her face, anxiety twisting in my gut.

"Wish we knew who those goons were who were after you, and more about that priestess. She doesn't sound like any Lycaon I've ever heard of," Gage mused.

"Not a bit." I leaned my head back against the seat. "Last time Sasha came back, she was awake. I hope nothing terrible happened to her."

"Yeah, me t—"

The door opened. It wasn't the ticket man.

Three feral faces of naked shifters looked in at us, their grins victorious.

"Found you," the leader growled.

Gage stood and tossed his bag at me before squaring off against the shifters. "Take her and run!"

If Sasha's safety hadn't been in question, I would never have left the young man alone to face them. But my Sasha was in danger, and Gage was right. We had to get her out of there.

But with the compartment blocked, there was only one way to go.

I threw open the opposite door, watching the scenery flash by. "Shit." There was no way Sasha and I would survive a jump.

I heard bones cracking behind me, and was just about to turn and ruin another set of clothes when I saw the bridge... and the water not far below.

"Sasha," I said, giving her a shake. "Sasha, princess, wake up. I need you to wake up now."

A small snort in her sleep was all I got.

"s**t," I swore again. I slung Gage's pack across my back and grabbed Sasha to me.

Gage groaned as he was thrown back against the splintering compartment seat.

"Give us the orb and the girl and no one gets hurt," the leader of our pursuers growled.

"In your dreams, motherfucker," I replied.

Then we were on the bridge over the water.

The leader's eyes widened. "Don't do it...."

I snatched Gage's arm and yanked all three of us straight out the side door of the compartment, just before the bridge ended.

All our pursuers could do was pop their heads out the door and howl.

As we careened through the air, I felt the cold water rushing up to meet us. I clutched Sasha to my chest, desperately hoping she would wake up before we hit the water. Gage's howl filled the air around us as we fell toward the white-capped waves below.

And then, just as suddenly as we had jumped, we hit the water. The shock of the cold water was overwhelming, but I kept my grip on Sasha as we sank beneath the surface. The weight of her body threatened to pull me under, but I kicked my legs and pushed us both upward.

As we broke through the surface, gasping for air, I heard the sounds of our pursuers shouting from the bridge overhead. I knew we weren't safe yet, but I had no idea what to do next.

I swam toward the shore with Sasha clutched tightly to me.

We made it to the bank, collapsing in a heap. Gage lay beside us, groaning in pain.

"Are you all right?" I asked him.

"Yeah," he gasped. "I'll live."

I turned to Sasha, fear gripping my heart.

"Come on, princess," I whispered, shaking her gently. "Wake up."

But she remained unresponsive. I felt the cold chill of panic set in as I checked her pulse. It was faint, but it was there. I couldn't lose her again.

"We need to get her to a healer," I said, looking around desperately for any sign of civilization.

Gage groaned as he tried to sit up. "I'm not sure we can risk it. Those shifters will be after us."

I gritted my teeth in frustration. He was right. We couldn't risk being found by our pursuers. But I couldn't just sit here and wait for Sasha to wake up on her own either.

"I need to do something," I said, my mind racing.

"Like what?" Gage asked, looking at me skeptically.

"I don't know yet," I replied, scanning the area for any sign of help.

That's when I noticed the smoke rising from a few miles away. It was faint, but it was there.

[Chapter 967: Rude Awakenings](#)

Sasha

I could feel the air change around me as Lucas stretched his hand toward me. Panic gripped me and I let the orb slip from my fingers to reach for him. But he vanished as the now-glowing blue sphere took me away.

This time the trip was instant, and I found myself on my back in a space that was cold and musty, nothing like the Goddess's temple.

The floor beneath me was made of stone, my hands lay criss-cross on my chest, the orb cradled in my palms. There was no Lucas. There was no stranger. There was no train, no chasing rogues, and no evil priestess.

There was, however, an assembly of people in dated clothing, looking at an altar at the front of... well... a temple—not one for the White Queen, but another temple for certain.

Low murmuring and chanting echoed in the air, dying off as the people turned to look at me.

I stood to my feet, clutching the orb to my chest. There was only one of me and perhaps a hundred of them. I hated the stupid thing, but it was my only defense and possible way out if something went wrong.

It sure felt wrong.

Suddenly, people began screaming, rushing to get away from me, and running for the exit. As the doors to the temple burst open, I could see a castle, dark and foreboding, not far off. The people were running straight that way.

As everyone else cleared out, however, one man stayed. He had been at the front of the altar, leading the chants.

I stepped backward as he approached me, his eyes fixated on the orb.

"Where did you get the Slipstone?" he demanded, stalking toward me.

I took a step back, mentally willing the orb to return me to Lucas. "I... I found it."

"Lies," the man said. He was more richly dressed than the others had been. And he was... familiar somehow. His features conjured up... something, something troublesome in the back of my mind.

He moved like quicksilver to close the space between us, gripping my arm.

"It's the truth," I insisted. After all, it was half true. Lucas found it.

The man chuckled darkly. "Then, I suppose you won't mind me taking it back from you." He pulled a dagger from his belt.

I tried to wrench away but his grip tightened painfully.

Everything in me knew the last thing that ever needed to happen was this man getting his hands on the orb. I backed all the way to the wall, holding the orb tighter.

"Please, Goddess, please take me back," I whispered.

The orb began to glow.

He looked at it and then backed up staring open-mouthed at me. "Dream dancer.... You have the mark, the star?"

I clutched my arm to the side and felt my stomach drop.

"The prophecy... has it come to pass?"

"I... I don't know what you're talking about!" I shouted and he rushed me again, pushed me to the wall, and pinned me in place.

Sasha....

I heard Lucas's voice, but I was trapped.

The man sniffed my neck, then grinned and stepped back.

Sasha....

"You do not know the prophecy now, but you will," the man chuckled. "You will." He sheathed his dagger. "May you be the fulfillment of it, dream dancer."

He was so close that the familiarity became clear to me now. My eyes widened and I gasped in disbelief. He looked like....

He held his hand up, and the orb pulsed and he was gone.

Or, I was gone, lost in a memory, or maybe meandering my way back through time. I saw myself crying in my room, the shattered bracelet in my hand.

I looked at her through my fearful child eyes and saw my mother's pale face cloaked in worry.

"They'll find her," she was saying.

She wasn't talking to me. I looked over to see it was the same man. He was much, much older, but the shape of his face and the eyes were the same.

"We need a new bone," he said calmly.

My mother shook her head. "Her baby teeth are...."

"It has to be fresh. We have to pull a tooth for a new potion, and this time, we need to make sure the spell can't be broken."

My heart thundered in my chest as I remembered the pain and torment of what followed. I wanted to stop them but I couldn't. My mother held me down.

Shutting my eyes tight, I struggled, fighting against her hold that was shockingly strong. I sobbed and cried and begged and fought.

"Sasha!"

Lucas's voice reached me in my fight. My mother's strong hold became his secure embrace as I tried fighting whatever was still holding me down.

"Help!" I cried with my eyes shut tight. "Get them off of me!"

"Goddess, Sasha, it's just the bed sheets and blankets, I swear!"

My eyes fluttered open, the tears behind them spilling out as I looked around an unfamiliar room. It had the feeling of an inn, or rather a hotel. The sheets were a pristine, bleach white and smelled freshly laundered.

And there was Lucas.

"Gage is at the local clinic." Lucas explained, rubbing my shaky upper arms soothingly as I tried to reorient myself to the world around me. "You were asleep. You reappeared and you were asleep. Goddess, Sasha, you slept for hours."

"Slept...?" I croaked, wondering if I'd been screaming.

"Wherever you went, you weren't sleeping," Lucas inferred.

"N-no." I looked around me. "Where is the orb?"

Lucas nodded at a beat-up, waterlogged bag sitting on the luggage stand near the closet. "I asked Gage to put it in his bag."

"Gage... the one who pulled us onto the train," I said slowly.

Lucas nodded. "Yes. He also defended us so I could get you off the train when the shifters showed up. Luckily, I was able to grab him as well. We jumped in a lake... and you still didn't wake up."

We were so close. Lucas was sitting on the edge of the bed, and we were so close we were breathing the same air. He leaned forward and bumped his forehead against mine. "I was so afraid," he whispered. "I was so afraid you wouldn't wake up."

I raised a trembling hand to Lucas's cheek. "I was afraid, too. I was afraid the orb wouldn't get me back to you. There was a man...."

Lucas's pulled back a little, his cheek still nestled in my palm. "What man?" he growled, sliding his hand over mine. He threaded our fingers together, then brought my hand to his lips to kiss my knuckles.

"What man, Sasha?"

"He... he wanted the orb. It felt like it was a long time ago. All the people were wearing old clothes. They ran away when they saw me, or rather saw the orb—all except him. He wanted to take it away from me. He even pulled out a knife, but then...."

"Did he hurt you?" Lucas asked, rubbing his thumb along the back of my hand in a gesture of comfort.

I shook my head. "He called it a Slipstone and told me to give it back, until he figured out I was a dream dancer. Then he started going on about a prophecy. Then... then... he...."

"He what, princess?" Lucas asked.

I swallowed. "He was old... and with my mother."

Lucas frowned. "Your mother?"

I shook my head. "He...."

I swallowed into a tight throat as I thought about the memories of what he did, what my mother's superstition had thought would be necessary.

I clutched the emerald of the necklace Lucas gave me knowing that I would have to tell him everything destroying that bracelet had led to.

"He was with my mother, but so much older and changed somehow."

"Why would he be with your mother?"

"Because you broke my bracelet."

He looked stricken and confused. "What does that... I don't understand. Was it an heirloom?"

"It was a talisman, for protection. My mother believed it would help hide me in Winter Forest."

"Hide you from who?"

"My father's pack."

Lucas's face went pale. Of course, my mother had reasons for wanting nothing to do with my father's pack.

"She was scared of them finding me, but I always thought she was just paranoid and superstitious. But now—maybe she knew something." I sighed. "I don't know. Maybe—"

Lucas put a finger over my lips. "It's okay. We can figure it out later. We can just... we can figure it out later. You're back. You're safe. You're awake. For now, that's all that matters," Lucas said.

Then he pulled me into his arms and held me against his chest. I noted he now smelled a bit of fresh lake water as well as his usual warm scent.

"Those aren't your clothes," I blurted, not sure what to do now that I was in his arms again. So many emotions warred within me.

Lucas let out a low rumbling laugh that vibrated straight to my core. "No. They're Gage's. Why, don't they look good on me?"

"You know you look good in anything," I chided.

"So do you," he murmured.

Lucas rubbed his hands up and down my back, and I clung to him even tighter. Whatever was going on, if I really were to disappear, Lucas Black was the only person alive who would even know I'd ever existed.

I tilted my face up so I could meet his eyes. "Lucas...?"

"I can't...." Lucas groaned, though his eyes were filled with the same longing that I felt.

I lowered my gaze so he wouldn't see the hurt. "Yeah, you're right, we...."

Lucas tucked a finger under my chin and lifted it. Then, to my surprise, his lips brushed over mine.

"I can't stop myself. I can't. I just can't anymore. If all we have is right now, then that is all I want," he whispered desperately against my lips before they crashed onto mine.

I felt a dizzy intoxication as I clung to him, kissing him back with the same passion and need as his. When he pulled back, the fire in his eyes bore into mine.

"Lucas, please, whatever happens, promise you won't forget me."

He cupped my cheeks in his palm and kissed me sweetly. "Wherever you go, if you can't come back, I will tear apart heaven and hell to follow and bring you back."

A tear spilled down my cheek. "Promise?"

His thumb brushed it away. "I promise."

"Okay," I croaked.

Lucas pulled me into another kiss. My fear and trembling turned to desire and want. The heat Lucas made my body feel now was overwhelming. His tongue was rough and demanding in my mouth, his hands moving to my bare thighs to slide the rest of me out from under the covers and into his lap.

His c**k was already stiff and throbbing through his pants, and he rubbed against my panties right where I wanted him to.

"You're soaking wet," Lucas growled in my ear, gripping my hips and pulling me tighter against his erection. "I can feel it all the way through my boxers. You want me, Sasha, don't you?"

I nodded, my lips swaying toward his, wanting more of what he'd been giving me.

A hard rub against my core made me cry out, my whole body trembling with need.

"Say it." Lucas rolled his hips again, making me whimper.

"S-say...?" I panted, not able to form a coherent thought to save my soul.

Lucas rubbed harder against me, making us both groan. "Tell me how much you want it."

"I... I want it, Lucas. I need you so bad," I moaned. "Please make love to me, Lucas."

[Chapter 968: Together at Last](#)

Sasha

Lucas pulled my shirt up and over my head and then his thumb and fingers moved lower, and lower still. He feasted his eyes on my bare breasts before ducking his head with a low groan and feasting on them with his lips.

I was more than dripping for him when he teased two fingers up inside me, rubbing my clit with his thumb.

He found something he liked, clearly, moaning around my n****e. But his head came up when his long fingers found my barrier.

"Holy s**t, princess. You're a virgin?" Lucas asked, his gray eyes seeking mine.

I felt my cheeks get hot. "Well, you don't have to make such a big deal of it."

Lucas brushed his lips over mine, then kissed me passionately. "It is a big deal. And I'm going to be honored. Because I don't have it in me to stop."

"Good. Because I don't want to stop you," I breathed.

Still, Lucas pulled his hand out of my panties.

"Lucas...?" I asked, only to have my eyes nearly pop out of my head when he brought his fingers to his mouth and... sucked his fingers clean.

"Sweet mercies of the White Queen," I gasped.

Lucas winked at me, his gray eyes a smoldering storm. "You taste divine."

"Uh-huh," I managed, still just staring. I couldn't believe what he'd just done....

Lucas used my daze to take off his shirt. He rolled my panties down as he laid me back on the bed, kissing the inside of my thigh when he finally dropped them over the side of the bed.

My eyes went wide when his face lifted from between my legs. He looked breathtakingly handsome with his tousled dark hair and those gray eyes blazing at me.

"You've been thinking about this for a long time," Lucas said, then used his knee to spread my legs wide for him.

"Yeah," I whispered, then gasped when he leaned in and licked up my slit with the flat of his tongue.

"Oh, goddess."

Lucas loved my p***y. He used his tongue and lips to drive me crazy, then he started to rub my clit, harder and harder until I was moaning and bucking my hips.

"Beautiful," Lucas murmured before licking my p***y again, then dipping his tongue in me and licking all the way back to my clit again. "You taste so sweet, princess."

He licked me again. "I can't wait to be inside you."

"Oh, goddess," I moaned, my head flopping to the side as my back arched and my fingers twisted in the sheets. I was grinding my p***y against Lucas' face, not even trying to hide how much I wanted him now.

Lucas whispered my name, then I felt the tongue on my clit one more time before he stood up, his eyes dark and smoldering.

I shivered, reaching for him. "Lucas...."

Lucas captured my hand and kissed my wrist, and I watched as he slid out of his pants and boxers. His beautiful, scarred body was all mine, including....

"f**k me..." I stuttered, staring down at his erection.

"I intend to," Lucas said, moving his body over mine, parting my thighs with his knee.

I put my hands on his chest. "Lucas, how is that even going to fit?!"

Lucas followed my gaze down to his positively massive c**k. Well, at least I thought it was massive.

He chuckled and I swatted his arm.

"It'll fit, princess," Lucas murmured, threading his fingers through mine, then bringing my hand down to touch him... there. "He's just really excited to see you, that's all."

"I'll say," I responded, rubbing my hand over his hard shaft.

He swelled even more and I groaned. So did Lucas, but for a completely different reason.

"Not helping, Lucas," I sighed, pulling my hand back.

"Mmm... depends on who you talk to," Lucas panted. He was holding back for me.

For me.

"Don't be scared, Sasha," Lucas said, nuzzling the shell of my ear. "I'll make you feel good."

"I know." I framed Lucas's face with my hands. "I trust you."

I just... I couldn't look away. And then he was over me, his c**k nudging my wet folds.

His hand reached over and his fingers threaded into the hair at the back of my head, dragging my lips to meet his as he began to sink into me. It wasn't painful, but it was certainly uncomfortable. I tensed as he sank deeper.

Oh Goddess, it was actually happening. I pressed my lips to Lucas's and wrapped my legs around his waist, encouraging him to do what was necessary so we could get on to the pleasure.

Lucas took my meaning. His sudden growl caught me off guard and he kissed me harder, letting all of him sink into me, taking my virginity with one swift thrust.

I cried out, and Lucas wrapped his arms around me, pushing himself deep and holding himself there, not moving, while the sharp pain dulled to a small throb.

"It's okay, Sasha sweetie. I've got you," Lucas whispered in my ear.

He rocked his hips a little, sliding gently inside me. I was still well-lubricated for him, and his movements were slow and easy.

I was soon wrapping myself more tightly around him, making sounds of need I didn't recognize in my throat as he inched in and out of me, careful as though I were made of glass.

I couldn't believe how good it felt, watching Lucas's eyes as they caressed me. It felt like we were made for each other, like we'd been waiting for each other for a very long time. I trusted him, completely, with my life, with my heart.

Lucas began to thrust in earnest, and it felt... good... so good. I was eager for him now, my moans increasingly loud. I'd never felt anything like this, never felt this heat or this ache or this absolute rightness.

I grabbed Lucas's shoulders and dug my nails in as he changed the angle. I cried out, my body arching up, my head thrown back.

"Does my princess want more?" Lucas asked, nibbling along my neck.

"Mhm. More," I agreed desperately.

Lucas picked up the pace, getting a little rougher in his movements.

My body didn't even bother to protest. I was ready for him now, ready for whatever he was going to give me.

"Harder, Lucas," I whimpered, still not recognizing my own voice. I was so... needy.

Lucas grunted and gripped my hips, giving me exactly what I needed, exactly how I needed it.

He fit perfectly inside me, bottoming out with every deep, hard thrust. His thumb moved in to rub my clit while he moved powerfully.

"Lucas," I moaned, my head starting to thrash on the pillow of its own accord, my hair falling into my eyes as pressure built between my legs, ready to crest at any moment.

"Let it happen, Sasha sweetie. Let me make you feel good," Lucas said. He brushed my hair aside so he could fuse our lips together and swallow my cries of pleasure.

I came around him, my inner muscles squeezing his c**k as euphoria spread to every part of my body.

Lucas groaned, and I felt his warm release inside me.

"Yessss..." he hissed in my ear. "Goddess... yes... finally...."

"Finally," I agreed, clinging to him, not wanting it to be over.

As though reading my mind, Lucas gave me a long, luxurious kiss and fondled my aching n****e.

"Again," he demanded.

It was a command I was more than happy to follow.

As we lay in the bathtub, Lucas gently passed a warm washcloth between my legs, washing away the last evidence of our mutual satisfaction and my virginity. We'd made love here, too, and now we were both so spent we could hardly move.

Lucas still touched and played a little, though, nuzzling my neck and pinching my n****s, sending delightful little zings through me.

"I am honored, you know, Sasha," Lucas whispered, running his fingers through my hair, making me arch into him like a cat before tucking the wet lock behind my ear. "I am honored to be that man."

I reached up and stroked his cheek. "I'm glad it was you."

Lucas turned his head and kissed my palm.

There were things we didn't say in that moment—that I only ever wanted it to be him, and that he wanted the same... that he wanted as badly as I did for him to be my mate.

But it was too soon for such words, and what if it turned out that he wasn't?

The idea made me sad, and I played with the pretty little emerald Lucas had placed around my neck not long ago.

"Don't think about it," Lucas murmured, kissing my temple and covering my hand with his, twirling the emerald between our joined fingers. "It'll either happen, or it won't. Either way, I wouldn't trade what we did here tonight for anything. Not anything or... anyone."

It was the closest he would come to saying the words, and I nodded, the same words stuck in my throat.

We stayed in the tub long after the water had gone tepid, absorbing each other's body heat. I didn't want the spell of our little world to break.

Finally, Lucas kissed the back of my neck and chaffed his hands up and down my clammy arms. "Okay, Sasha sweetie. Let's get out."

"Do we have to?" I asked, almost whining.

Lucas chuckled, then rose in one fluid motion, standing with me in his arms. "Yes," he said, "my little prune."

"Prune?" I protested.

He slid his lips over mine, drawing me up so he could kiss me thoroughly. "You prefer Lemon Tart?"

I glided my fingers over the short-cropped hair at his temple and into the unruly, wet, sexy mess on top of his head. "I prefer Sasha sweetie."

Lucas smiled. "You'll always be my Sasha sweetie."

"Promise?" I asked, knowing I was now wearing my heart on my sleeve.

"As long as I can keep you," Lucas said, somewhat evasively.

I sighed. He was right. It was still too soon for those kinds of promises. "How are we getting home?"

"Brady. He'll be here tomorrow morning. If Gage isn't ready by then, I'll send Brady back again for him. Poor guy was just coming to the Capital to study and then fell in with us miscreants," Lucas said. He

carried me out of the tub, then set me down before patting me dry. "But that's tomorrow, Sasha sweetie. We still have tonight."

I swallowed, remembering our already rigorous activities. "All night?" I squeaked.

"Too much?" Lucas asked, starting to wrap a towel around his waist.

Boldly, I pulled it off him. If tonight was possibly our only night... if he "came to his senses" again in the morning or... What if I did?

"All night," I challenged him.

His eyes lit with inner fire and a deep, rumbling growl came from his chest. "You're not going to be able to sit down for days," he warned me.

I was playing a dangerous game with Lucas Black. But I was playing to win. "Promises, promises." I smoothed my palms over his n****s.

Lucas growled again and then snatched me up and strode to the bed. I bounced when he dropped me on it, a flailing mess of limbs, which Lucas quickly sorted out so he could get on top of and inside me.

I lost my breath, staring at this beautiful man as he made passionate love to me.

We had tonight... all night. And we were going to make the most of it.

[Chapter 969: The Morning After](#)

Sasha

Lucas wasn't kidding.

I moved delicately in the seat of Lucas's town car, trying to relieve the well-sexed ache I felt while I was sitting. It was a dull, throbbing pain, but every time we hit a pothole, I wondered if that third time had been worth it... or the fourth... or fifth....

Goddess, I'd lost track of how many times Lucas Black had ravished me.

Lucas smoothed a hand over my knee as he spoke to Brady, giving him the update on events while Ian drove. His touch made butterflies in my stomach tickle goosebumps down my arms.

Totally worth it, I decided, placing my hand over his.

Lucas thumbed the soft skin on the inside of my thigh, and I praised the inspiration that had told me to buy a skirt instead of pants to wear today. Lucas seemed appreciative as well.

Brady scratched the back of his neck as Lucas finished. "So... what do you want to do?"

"Throw it in the deepest part of the sea," Lucas grumbled, which got a squeak of protest from me.

Lucas squeezed my knee reassuringly. "I know we can't. Stupid thing would probably make you swim after it."

"Hammer and chisel?" Brady suggested.

"Guys, the Goddess herself says I need to use it—no hammers, no chisels, no throwing down wells or into the sea," I said sternly.

Lucas grunted his displeasure but nodded just the same. "There's nothing for it. We're going to have to tell the Alpha King."

"That we stole a precious artifact and destroyed a religious site?" Brady groaned.

"Okay, I'll tell the Alpha King. It was my site, my idea, and my responsibility," Lucas assured him.

"I should go with you," I said, threading my fingers through his.

"No," Lucas replied, "absolutely not."

"Why?" I asked with a frown. "I'm the one the Goddess chose, and I'm the one the orb keeps showing things... and disappearing." I shuddered. "It really could choose a more pleasant location next time."

"Hopefully, there is no next time." Lucas squeezed my hand. "I'm going to talk to the Alpha King. I'm not bringing you or the orb. Hell, I'm not even sure I should even talk to him."

"You don't trust King Xander?" Brady asked, sounding confused.

"I don't trust everyone in his court." Lucas sighed and leaned his chin on my shoulder. "I don't know. I have to think about it."

Lucas gave my neck a possessive kiss, ending in a nip I felt all the way down to my nethers.

"You sure riding in front is far enough away from you two?" Brady chuckled.

"Nope, but what choice do we have?" Lucas quipped.

I put my hand on Lucas's chest when it seemed he was coming back for more. "I'm not going anywhere, Lucas. You don't need to have me in the car in front of Ian and Brady."

"Could be fun," Lucas teased, and I smacked his arm.

"As to going anywhere...." Lucas glared at the seat behind us that separated us from the trunk and, consequently, Gage's bag containing the orb.

I placed a hand on Lucas's cheek. "It's far enough away. I'm not going to touch it right now."

"Hmph," Lucas grunted. "If it were up to me, you'd never touch it again."

"I second the motion," Brady said.

I rolled my eyes. "The Goddess herself gave me a mission...."

Lucas silenced me with a peck on the lips. "We'll discuss it later."

I sank back in my seat, resisting the urge to throw up my hands in frustration, before I smacked the overbearing brute in the face, not that that wasn't becoming appealing....

"We've entered the capital, sir," Ian said. "Where to?"

"Miss Wentley's apartment," Lucas replied.

"We can't. What if Amanda's home?" I hissed.

Lucas's lips twitched. "As much as I'd like to see just how sore you are from last night with all your shifting around in your seat, I have a few things I need to do. I'll be back later, I promise."

My cheeks flamed. "Oh."

Brady covered a laugh with a cough.

Ian was far too professional to do more than bite his lip.

Lucas squeezed my hand again, with the way his thumb skimmed up under the edge of my skirt promising so much more.

Lust banished my embarrassment, and now I was blushing for a different reason.

We stopped in front of my dorm and Lucas tugged me out of the sedan by our joined hands. He let go as we approached the front stairs, only to casually put his hand low on my back, guiding me to my unit.

At my door, I fumbled with my keys, feeling his heat behind me. Lucas plucked the keys from my hand and very efficiently unlocked my door.

I spun to face him, and Lucas captured my lips, giving me the most thorough, toe-curling kiss of my life.

"I hope Amanda's gone when I get back," Lucas murmured in my ear, then took a step back.

With a swallow, I said, "Me, too."

Lucas gave me a cheeky smirk, then turned and left me there, a completely undone puddle of need.

I turned back to my door and pushed my way in, seeing immediately that I was alone. That was alright. I needed time to process before I'd be able to relay all that had happened to Amanda.

I flopped down on my bed, staring at the ceiling. In my mind's eye, I could see Lucas, naked, our bodies twining in the near-dark, and I moaned.

Curling my fingers into a fist, I shook my head. I needed to focus. So much more had happened than Lucas making love to me, over... and over... and over....

I shook my head. "Get a grip, Sasha," I admonished myself.

The real priority was the orb, and that man from the past... and some unknown prophecy he and the old priestess had been babbling about.

I couldn't shake the memory of my mother and the old man. Had she been trying to protect me from this prophecy? Why didn't she ever tell me about it?

I let my tongue trace over my back teeth until it found the one that had been removed, fortified by the old man's spell, and replaced. The pain had been excruciating, but the fever that followed was what had nearly done me in.

Had all of that in the end really been for nothing?

But instead of being able to put the pieces of the puzzle together, I just got more frustrated and confused, adding to the confusion I felt over Lucas. It seemed like neither of us was going to “come to our senses,” which brought our relationship into a wholly different territory.

If I was honest with myself, I knew I'd never felt this way about any other man, or boy, for that measure. Even my childhood crushes paled in comparison to the heat and... and other things Lucas Black made me feel.

What did I feel? Everything was all jumbled up and all I really wanted was for Lucas to show up, tear off my clothes, and ravage again me until I was past the power of thought.

There was a knock at my door, and I smiled, relieved. Here was the man himself to do just that.

I rolled off the bed, quickly smoothing out the comforter, then trotted to the door, pulling it open with an eager yank.

My face fell when I saw Donovan. “What are you doing here?” I asked coldly.

Donovan frowned at me. “Nice to see you, too.”

“I thought I told you I didn't want to see you again.” I folded my arms across my chest, still wearing Gage's T-shirt. In retrospect, I should have changed. The white T-shirt was a little tight.

This was a fact Donovan hadn't missed. He looked me up and down as though I were steak. “Come on.

Don't be like that. We've been friends a long time.”

“Yeah, and you managed to wreck that in less than fifteen minutes. Goodbye, Donovan,” I snapped, starting to shut the door.

Donovan grabbed it, and my strength was no match for him. I couldn't get it closed.

He held it open and glared at me. I shivered as I looked into eyes that seemed to be void of any soul.

“Nice necklace, did he give it to you?” Donovan growled.

“That's none of your business, Donovan,” I replied, wrenching at the door, but to no avail.

While my hands were occupied, Donovan pushed my hair aside, revealing something else he didn't like.

“He gave you that as well?”

I scowled at him. “Let go of the door, Donovan. I have nothing to say to you. Now leave.”

Donovan instead gave me a shove, sending me stumbling back into my dorm room. He kicked the door shut behind him. “Little b***h didn't mark you properly, huh?”

“I don't know what you're talking about. Now get the f**k out of my room, Donovan!” I yelled.

He stalked toward me, a chilling smile on his face.

“I can mark you properly,” Donovan grinned.

“You're insane,” I realized aloud, quickly putting the bed between me and him.

Donovan shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not."

"You're not my mate," I insisted.

Donovan smiled at me again. I didn't know how I ever found that smile charming. "I will be in a second. One little bite, and you're mine."

"No, Donovan! What the hell is wrong with you?! Do you just go around biting ALL the girls? Every girl you meet?!"

"Nah, just the ones I like. I can always reject you later," Donovan said.

I squared my shoulders. "Let's get one thing straight. I reject you. You don't even have to bite me. I'm rejecting you in advance."

Donovan shook his head slowly. "Can't do that until your birthday. We can have all kinds of fun before that." He advanced on me. "All kinds."

I didn't even want to know what this madman considered fun. "Go away, Donovan. Now!"

Donovan padded closer, stalking me toward the far side of my room. "I don't think I will. You reek of him. Give me an hour or two, and you will reek of me." He patted his flat belly. "Maybe get a pup in you before we part ways."

I felt sick. Nothing horrified me more than the idea of carrying this demon's spawn. "H-How many p-pups do you have? How many women have you done this to?!"

Donovan lifted a shoulder. "No pups yet, not for lack of trying."

"You're sick. You need help," I said as he walked around the side of the bed.

"I'd rather just help myself. Life is a buffet, Sasha, and I've made you the main course," Donovan chuckled.

How could I have ever thought of him as a friend?

Before he could get me caught in a corner, I dove over the bed, landing hard on my elbow on the other side. I cried out in pain.

Donovan pounced, ripping down my shirt to expose my shoulder.

"This will only hurt for a minute," he grinned, his fangs elongating.

[Chapter 970: Dueling](#)

Sasha

I pressed my thumbs upward, gouging at Donovan's eyes. "Get OFF me, you sick bastard!" I shouted.

Donovan reared back, trying to avoid being blinded. "You b***h!" he roared, slapping me across the face.

My head bounced on the floor and I began to see stars. "No," I said, but my movements became uncoordinated.

Goddess, I couldn't let him mark me. I couldn't let him win. I couldn't give up now. I shook my head, trying to clear the dizziness. My eyes met his and I saw the fury burning in them. He charged at me like a bull, his arms outstretched.

I rolled out of the way, narrowly avoiding his attack. Donovan stumbled a few steps and turned to face me again. I scrambled to my feet, keeping my eyes on him. I knew I had to end this fight fast. I couldn't afford to let him get the upper hand again.

I charged at him, taking him by surprise. I aimed a punch at his face, but he deflected it with his forearm. Donovan retaliated with a swift kick to my stomach, knocking the wind out of me. I gasped for air, trying to recover from the blow.

Donovan took advantage of my momentary weakness and grabbed me by the hair, yanking me close to him. I felt his hot breath against my neck and shut my eyes tight.

Suddenly, my door splintered off its hinges, accompanied by a feral roar.

I opened my eyes as Donovan looked behind him. I managed to knee him in the groin just as Lucas, half-shifted, ripped Donovan off of me.

He threw Donovan into a wall, tangling him up in Amanda's twinkle lights and leaving a long crack in the sheetrock.

Donovan landed on Amanda's bed, the lucky prick, looking like a combination of angry dog and toppled Christmas tree.

"Lucas...." I reached for him.

But Lucas wasn't quite finished with Donovan. He tightened the twinkle lights around Donovan's throat, meaning when Donovan fully shifted, he began to strangle.

"You are one stupid sonofabitch," Lucas seethed, some of his wolfy gruffness coloring the edges of his tone. He gave Donovan a shake by the twinkle lights as Donovan's tongue lolled and he struggled to breathe. "But I'm going to try to get something through your thick skull." He pointed at me, jerking Donovan's head in my direction. "You touch her again, you die, got it?"

Donovan nodded as vigorously as Lucas's grip would allow him to.

"Good. Glad we understand each other." Lucas dropped Donovan head-first onto the floor.

Then Lucas turned his attention to me fully, and whatever he saw made his gray eyes lit with both concern and deepening rage. He turned back to Donovan, and I knew he was going to rip his throat out.

"Lucas, don't. He's not worth it," I said, touching Lucas's ankle. I tried to roll over, but it made my head spin.

"You are very, very, VERY lucky this is a bad time for me to go to prison," Lucas growled at Donovan. "She just saved your miserable life. Be grateful."

Donovan coughed and nodded, his eyes still bulging with fear.

Lucas turned back to me and carefully lifted me in his arms. "We're leaving. I'll send someone for your things. You're staying with me for a while."

"What? Why? He's practically dead," I replied, though it ended on a nauseous moan.

"It's not him I'm worried about. It's them." Lucas carried me to the window and pushed aside the curtain.

With effort, I looked down and recognized the shifters from Levis. "Sweet mercies of the White Queen, they just don't give up!"

"Apparently not," Lucas grunted. "This place isn't safe for you anymore. Hell, I'm not entirely sure about my house at this point, but at least it has a fence and a gate."

"Good point," I replied softly. I burrowed my head into Lucas's arm. "Okay. Take me home."

"You've got that right," Lucas said possessively, and the butterflies in my stomach suddenly had nothing to do with nausea.

Lucas stepped over Donovan in order to carry me out the door. He headed for the freight elevator instead of the main one.

My stomach rolled with every step, but it wasn't like it was safe to stop and take me to a doctor, not with those goons circling outside.

"Just hang on. I'll call for a doctor when we get home," Lucas said softly, as though reading my mind.

The freight elevator opened onto a small loading deck, and Lucas tiptoed down the metal stairs to one side.

I wrapped my arms tightly around his neck when I saw a figure at the mouth of the alley.

"It's Brody," Lucas murmured, rubbing my back. "It's okay. It's Brody."

I relaxed... until Brody spoke.

"It's not just going to be Brody if we don't hurry up," the vampire said, craning his neck behind him.

"Jon's parked around the corner."

Lucas began edging along the wall quickly but then picked up speed when Brody swore and made a run for it.

The Levis shifters had sniffed us out, apparently, and were descending, one of them actually howling in delight.

Lucas adjusted his grip on me, holding me close to his chest protectively as we darted through the alleyway. I could feel my heart hammering in my chest as we ran, the sound of the shifter's howls echoing behind us like a haunting melody.

"How can this happen in the middle of the Capitol?!" I groaned, swallowing bile in my throat.

"I don't think they quite understand how things work here, and I don't think we want to hang around to educate them," Lucas pointed.

I silently agreed, clinging to Lucas for dear life.

Brody was holding the door open for us when we reached the sedan. Lucas rolled us both inside and the door slammed shut.

I leaned my head against the cool gloss of the car window, my eyes closed as the adrenaline from the fight and the fear of the ambush coursed recklessly through my veins.

I was in pain, but I couldn't tell where. I just felt sore all over. Lucas's hand slipped into mine, and I squeezed it tightly.

Ion hit the gas as the Levis shifters jumped on the vehicle, leaving deep claw marks in the paint.

"You sons of bitches, do you have ANY idea how long it's going to take to buff that out?!" Ion yelled, spinning the sedan around, throwing the shifters off the car and into the street with his momentum.

"Remind me never to lean on the sedan again," Brody muttered, staring out the window at the scattered shifters.

Ion floored it, adding insult to injury by sending gravel ping-ponging off them.

"I don't pay you enough, Ion," Lucas said, staring out the back window as the shifters disappeared.

Ion snorted. "I would agree, sir."

Lucas wrapped his arms around me and held me close all the way to his home. He only let up on his grip when the gate closed firmly behind the car.

"Brody, please go call a doctor. Soso hit her head," Lucas sighed, carefully lifting me out of the car when Ion stopped.

"Hit her head? How, why?" Brody asked.

"Donovan. Don't worry, he got his," Lucas growled.

Brody nodded and took the stairs two at a time to go find a phone.

I let Lucas carry me to a bedroom and lay me down. By this time, I was so out of it that I almost didn't realize I was in Lucas's bedroom... Lucas's bed.

"Good point," I replied softly. I burrowed my head into Lucas's arm. "Okay. Take me home."

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I wrapped my arms tightly around his neck when I saw a figure at the mouth of the alley.

"It's Brady," Lucas murmured, rubbing my back. "It's okay. It's Brady."

I relaxed... until Brady spoke.

"It's not just going to be Brady if we don't hurry up," the vampire said, craning his neck behind him. "Ian's parked around the corner."

Lucas began edging along the wall quickly but then picked up speed when Brady swore and made a run for it.

The Levis shifters had sniffed us out, apparently, and were descending, one of them actually howling in delight.

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I silently agreed, clinging to Lucas for dear life.

Brady was holding the door open for us when we reached the sedan. Lucas rolled us both inside and the door slammed shut.

I leaned my head against the cool glass of the car window, my eyes closed as the adrenaline from the fight and the fear of the ambush coursed recklessly through my veins.

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Ian hit the gas as the Levis shifters jumped on the vehicle, leaving deep claw marks in the paint.

"You sons of bitches, do you have ANY idea how long it's going to take to buff that out?!" Ian yelled, spinning the sedan around, throwing the shifters off the car and into the street with his momentum.

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Brady nodded and took the stairs two at a time to go find a phone.

I let Lucas carry me to a bedroom and lay me down. By this time, I was so out of it that I almost didn't realize I was in Lucas's bedroom... Lucas's bed.

"Nice sheets," I said, suddenly self-conscious. The satin did feel nice beneath my arms.

"They'll feel even better when you're naked," Lucas murmured. He cleared his throat. "Not that that's something we should be thinking about right now. Have to make sure you don't have a concussion, though I'd assume you do."

"Too bad," I replied with a slight smile against the dull ache in my head.

Lucas groaned and kissed me, and my world spun in a good way. "Don't worry, I will take care of you." Lucas cupped my cheek.

I stroked his wrist. "You take good care of me."

Lucas kissed me again, then rose from the edge of the bed. "I'm going to make sure we're secure here. And let the guard know he can let the doctor in. I think Ian already has the poor guy on high alert."

I nodded, then regretted it.

Lucas winced on my behalf and kissed my forehead. "It's going to be okay. I'm going to make it okay."

"Okay," I said with absolute trust.

Lucas went to the door and let it swing slightly shut behind him. I watched shadows pass over the light as people walked back and forth in the hall.

I closed my eyes for just a second, or so I thought. When I opened them, a doctor was sitting next to me on a chair, checking my pulse.

"Tut tut, Sasha Wentley. We can't have you in this condition," the doctor complained, shaking her head.

"Not good?" I asked, wondering where Lucas was. It surprised me that he wouldn't be there for the diagnosis.

"Concussed, surely," the doctor sighed. "We cannot have that. We cannot. You need to be strong and fighting fit."

I frowned at the doctor. "Fight? Why?"

The doctor's eyes sparkled, then suddenly morphed into cloudy, wizened ones I'd seen before. "The prophecy, of course, my dear... the prophecy."

I screamed and struggled up the bed, but the old priestess's hold on my wrist was iron.

"Now, now, settle down. I'm not going to hurt you or that yummy man you've been pal-ing around with. Like I said, I need you fighting fit. Prophecies are not easy to fulfill, after all," the old priestess said.

Where was Lucas?

"What did you do to Lucas?" I demanded.

"Why, he and everyone else in this household seem to have gotten into some sleeping powder. It's perfectly harmless and will wear off in about half an hour, plenty of time for me to help you with that concussion," the old priestess responded, waving a hand. "Now, my shifter helpers might get a little violent if you refuse to do as I say... and with the household unable to defend itself...."

I stopped struggling. "What do you want me to do?" I asked, defeated.

"Better." The old priestess let go of my wrist and reached to the bedside table, where I hadn't noticed a steaming pot of tea. She poured a cup and held it to my lips. "Drink. That is all. Then we will leave."

I resigned myself and took a gulp.

"The whole thing," the old priestess admonished.

I drank the whole cup down, then settled weakly back on the pillows. Something was happening in my body, starting in my stomach and burning out from there. I whimpered.

"It had to be more potent because time is of the essence," the old priestess apologized. She stood. "Good luck, Sasha Wentley. I'll see you again soon."

Goddess, I hoped not. "Lucas?" I asked weakly.

But she was already gone.

"Lucas...." I whispered as the searing sensation made its way to my head. "Lucas... Lucas...."