

The Warrior's Broken Mate Chapter 71

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I glanced between the two men standing before me, and there was no denying the similarities. Sadly, Elias truly did resemble his father. And that father of his? He was staring at me with an expression I couldn't quite place.

"It's good to finally meet the renowned Lyra. Your mother spoke of you constantly," Declan said.

"Finn Corwin," I replied, voice level.

"That's the name your mother knew me by. I couldn't afford to reveal my real identity," he answered.

"You were involved with her," I said plainly.

"I was. But only after my mate passed. And you were just a child back then," Declan replied

without hesitation.

"I know. For a while, people even wondered if you were my biological father," I told him.

"That would've meant you were fated to your brother," Declan said, voice neutral.

"Yeah, that definitely threw a wrench in things for a bit," I said, not bothering to hide the sarcasm.

"Eventually we cleared that up. But what you haven't explained is why the hell you're here,"

Elias cut in.

"I told you I had something important to say. And now that Lyra's here, it's time for all of us to talk," Declan said as he took a seat at the table.

Elias looked over at me cautiously, clearly uneasy, but I made my way across the room and sat down opposite Declan without hesitation.

"No coffee for your guest?" Declan asked, raising an eyebrow.

"No. But Lyra, would you like some?" Elias asked without missing a beat.

"I'd love one," I answered, smiling slightly.

Elias went ahead and prepared my coffee, grabbing himself a beer while he was at it. Another man joined us at the table then, but Elias casually pulled my chair closer to his with one swift motion, making sure I wasn't sitting near either of them.

"And you are?" I asked the newcomer.

"Harry," he replied.

"My dad's Beta. Also Luke's father," Elias added for clarity..

"Does Luke know they're here?" I asked.

"He's on his way now," Elias confirmed, and I gave a slight nod.

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"I can hardly believe my son is mated to the last remaining werewolf royal," Declan said, clearly pleased.

"I'm not sure why that excites you. It has absolutely nothing to do with you. And you sure as hell aren't getting anything out of it," I snapped.

"She's got a mouth on her," Declan said, glancing at Elias.

"Oh, that's nothing. Just wait until she really lets loose," Elias said with a smirk.

"I can only imagine. If she's anything like her mother..." Declan began.

"I am nothing like her," I cut him off firmly. He stared at me with a puzzled look, and Harry's

reaction mirrored his.

That's when it hit me—they probably didn't know. They had no idea she was still alive. That she'd been hidden away in the castle for the past sixteen years.

The front door suddenly slammed open, and Luke stood there with pitch-black eyes and a murderous expression, radiating pure rage. His focus was locked on the two men—his and Elias's fathers.

I remembered the stories. The way those men had brutalized their sons. The years of cruelty. I couldn't blame them for the hatred in their eyes. Elias and Luke had grown stronger since escaping, but I wondered—was this their first confrontation since then? Or had there been others before this?

"What the hell is this? Why aren't you already tearing them apart?" Luke snarled.

"Because this asshole claims he has something important to tell us," Elias said, motioning toward his father.

"We don't need his damn information. What we need is for him and his scumbag friend over there to be six feet under," Luke barked.

"When the hell did you grow a spine? You were always pathetic," Harry sneered.

"Yeah? That tends to happen after a lifetime of getting beaten down and told you're garbage," I shot back, eyes locked on him. He stared at me, clearly not expecting me to stand up for

Luke. But the surprise he got? That was only the beginning.

Luke was the closest thing I had to a sibling, and there was no chance I'd let this bastard show up and start tearing him apart all over again.

"What do you know?" Elias demanded sharply.

"It concerns Thorne Bennett," Declan replied.

"If you're not going to spit it out all at once, then leave. We don't have time for games," Elias snapped.

"He's working with a witch. A very dangerous one. She's planning to open a portal into another realm," Declan said. Elias turned his gaze to me, then to Luke.

"And?" Elias asked, unimpressed.

"That's not enough for you?" Harry interjected.

"We already figured that part out," I said flatly.

"That's why you're here, right? Because you're going to stop them. How in the world do you think she's going to take down her own father?" Declan said with a mocking chuckle.

"What makes you so sure she can't?" Elias countered.

"Ever since you took her from Thorne, the rumors have been nonstop. We've heard how she was locked away in an attic. How she was abused and poisoned day after day. How she didn't even know she was a royal. Thorne only kept her alive to exploit her power," Declan said grimly.

"Well, she's no longer the girl she once was. I'm telling you right now, she's got just as much of a chance at ending him as anyone else," Elias said firmly.

"Probably more than anyone, actually," Luke added.

"You've got a lot of faith in her," Declan said, eyes narrowing.

"Why are you even warning us about Thorne?" Luke asked. A valid question. Why show up now? Why care?

"Because that portal can't be allowed to open. We're aware of what lies beyond it, and the last thing we need is for it to cross over," Harry said.

"Well, it won't," I said with complete certainty.

"We've already gotten a taste of that world. That black witch summoned a few of its creatures to attack us. So we're not going in blind. But as Lyra said, that portal's not opening. We won't let that lunatic destroy everything," Elias added.

"Looks like they don't need us after all, Declan," Harry said with a shrug.

"Yeah, seems like we wasted our time coming here," Declan replied dryly.

"Actually, you didn't. This gives you the perfect opportunity to say goodbye to your sons. Because I don't think it's wise for either of you to ever show your faces near them again," I said coldly.

"And what, you're going to stop us? Don't make me laugh," Declan mocked.

I turned to him completely and locked eyes with a burning stare. He returned the look, but then began flailing, trying to brush something off his arm in panic.

He looked down, shouting and flinching, yelling for help as if something were crawling all over him. But Elias, Luke, and even Harry just watched him with raised brows—there was nothing there.

Elias's gaze flicked over to me and noticed how focused I was on Declan. Then I eased my expression, dropping my concentration, and Declan suddenly went quiet.

He looked around frantically, scanning the room.

"Where did they go?" he asked, confused.

"Where did what go?" Harry questioned.

“The scorpions!” Declan blurted.

I gave him a slow, pointed smile. “Next time, it’ll be rattlesnakes,” I said evenly. “Now get the hell out.”

Hailey rose from her chair and grabbed Declan by the arm, hurrying him out of the suite without another word.

“Oh yeah. We’re definitely going to crush her father,” Luke said with a smirk as he sank into a chair across from me.

“Alpha, Luna,” a scout’s voice came through the mind link.

“What is it?” Elias asked quickly.

“You need to get here immediately. The ritual has started,” the scout warned.

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Elias and I had to rally our warriors as quickly as possible. We needed to reach my father’s pack, but there were a ton of obstacles in our way.

We had no clue how many members he had now. No idea how many patrols were running. We didn’t even know the layout of his new pack territory... we were heading into this completely blind.

Everyone left the hotel at staggered times and casually, just to keep the humans from getting suspicious.

Elias and I were the last to head out, and we all drove halfway toward the pack before pulling into a parking lot near the edge of the forest. From there, we’d have to move on foot and in smaller groups to avoid detection.

Once we got out of the cars, we broke off into our assigned groups. Elias refused to let me go with anyone but him. He said he’d cover me if I froze when facing my dad—and I guess he meant it. Blair was with us too.

She was the only one we believed might actually be able to stop the ritual.

The scouts met us at the lot and started briefing us on the patrols they’d observed and the location of the ritual.

“This doesn’t add up,” I said.

“What do you mean?” Elias asked, so I pointed at the map again.

“They’ve got all this space, but they’re doing the ritual here—in this clearing, right next to the border patrols,” I explained, tapping the spot.

“Yeah. They could’ve picked anywhere. Why do it there?” Luke asked, confused.

“Maybe there’s something special about that land,” one of the warriors suggested.

“Or maybe they knew the scouts were watching,” I said.

“We have to consider every possibility. And we need to be ready for anything. This could be a full-blown trap. So we need a strategy, and we need it now,” Elias said.

“Well, we’re already split into groups. That gives us an edge. Just remember, once we move in from all different directions, we’re blind to the layout. Everyone needs to be sharp—no mistakes. We’re not losing anyone today,” I said.

“Damn right we’re not,” Elias agreed.

We finalized our strategy, and everyone began moving out toward the pack lands. Once we were close enough that patrols wouldn’t catch our scent, we fanned out.

Elias and I stayed back with our team. The warriors shifted into wolf form, but Elias and I remained in our human bodies.

We moved directly toward the border of my father’s pack.

At first, it was silent. Too silent. But the moment we crossed over the line, we were ambushed—overwhelmed by patrols, our group of ten instantly outnumbered.

A man stepped out from behind a tree, leaning against the trunk casually.

“Really? This is all you brought? You must be way too confident in your people,” the man mocked.

“Who the hell are you? I’ve never seen you before,” Elias said, narrowing his eyes.

“I wasn’t here before. But you’ve meddled in my affairs long enough. I figured it was time I stepped in,” the man replied.

“I don’t even know who you are,” Elias snapped.

“Aaron Collins. Collins Corporation,” he introduced smoothly.

“Who?” I asked, confused.

"I bought out a few of his companies after they went under. Turned them into real successes,

Elias explained.

"You forced them into bankruptcy. I know exactly what you did. You and that little w***e tore my business apart. Lenore was talented—loyal, too. Where is she now?" Aaron asked coldly.

"She's dead," Elias said plainly.

Aaron let out a low whistle. "Shame. Guess your loyalty didn't go both ways."

"So what—my dad brought you in to intimidate us? What's a corporate guy supposed to do, scare us with numbers?" I asked, narrowing my eyes.

"Because I've got a massive pack backing me. And they're here too. You're not walking out of this alive," Aaron said confidently.

"That's funny. I was just thinking the exact same thing—about you," I shot back.

Right then, a wave of growls erupted behind Aaron. Another unit of our wolves had circled around silently and now surrounded him—we outnumbered them now.

He turned toward us, then glanced at the wolves guarding the space between us. He quickly twisted around again, spotting our forces closing in from behind.

He suddenly bolted, attempting to flee—but our wolves were already prepared. The one in front of him lunged, slamming him down before he could get far, then began ripping into him without hesitation.

Chaos broke out. His wolves and ours collided in a violent crash of snarls and growls. Neither side held back. No mercy. It was clear—this was a battle that only ended in death.

Elias gripped my hand tightly and we took off into the woods, racing through the trees with me just a step behind him.

Our teams had surrounded the territory, and just moments ago we'd received word from one of them—they'd found the real spot where the ritual was happening.

We finally broke through the treeline and stepped into the tiny town that sat hidden there— and it was definitely small.

There weren't many houses, but several tents had been pitched throughout the area, most of them occupied.

The place wasn't much—nothing fancy. Not even a store in sight. Just basic homes and temporary shelters.

I shouted at the civilians to get back inside and stay put. This wasn't something they wanted to be caught up in.

We reached the clearing where the ritual was underway. Darkness loomed, except for the glow of candles flickering around the edges and the shifting shadows that danced within the circle.

At the center, it was obvious the portal was forming—right where the ring of candles surrounded the space. The black witch moved forward, lifting both arms toward the sky.

They hadn't noticed us yet. But we spotted our other warriors already taking their positions. They were holding steady, waiting for our cue.

The black witch advanced to the very edge of the circle, arms high, and lightning suddenly began slamming into the ground within it.

"We're almost out of time," Elias muttered.

"It's already happening," I said grimly.

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Just as we were preparing to charge into the clearing, several figures emerged from the shadows and began placing objects within the large circle. That's when I realized—they were forming smaller, individual barriers. Multiple rings inside the main one.

They dragged out a young teenage werewolf girl, sobbing and thrashing, and threw her into one of the smaller circles. The black witch immediately sealed it, trapping her inside.

Next, they hauled in a vampire and tossed her into another circle before sealing that one as well.

"Now, for the final act. The blood that will open the gateway—royal blood," my father declared to the crowd. His followers erupted in cheers, but I was scanning the area, alert. No one was approaching us. No ambush. I felt Elias's hand tighten around mine.

Then, another warrior stepped out of the darkness, dragging a struggling woman before tossing her into the front circle.

“Rowan,” I breathed out.

“How the hell did he find her?” Elias asked, stunned.

“I don’t know. Elias, I can’t-” I choked out.

“I get it. You can’t lose her again,” he said softly.

“I treated her like garbage. I never forgave her,” I admitted.

“Lyra. You’ll have time to fix that. I swear. We’ll get her out of here,” Elias promised.

Rowan had been thrown into the circle closest to the black witch—front and center.

“You really thought I didn’t know you were alive?” Dad said with a cruel smile.

“You told your Beta to kill me,” Rowan said bitterly. At that moment, another warrior appeared from the trees, carrying a sack. He reached inside and pulled out Beta Cassian’s severed head.

Rowan screamed. The head was tossed at her feet, left there as a cruel reminder. She knew- Cassian was dead because of her.

“I always knew he failed to kill you. I just needed him to lead me to you. And that’s exactly what he did,” Dad sneered.

“What do you want from me?” Rowan demanded.

“I told you already. Your blood will open the portal. Just like theirs,” he said, gesturing to the werewolf and vampire.

“So you’re planning to unleash hell on Earth? Just like that?” Rowan asked, horrified.

“No, not just like that. This will be a slow, drawn-out affair. The portal only stays open while you’re bleeding. The second you run dry, it closes. So we need to keep you alive... and suffering... for as long as we can. That’s the part I enjoy most,” he said coldly.

“You’re a monster,” Rowan spat.

“Well, the alternative is your daughter. I could track her down. Her blood works the same,” Dad said casually.

“That’s why you kept her hidden and abused all those years, wasn’t it? Just for this damn ritual. You were always planning to use her,” Rowan said.

“Obviously. Why else would I keep that useless brat breathing?” he replied with a shrug.

“Stay away from her,” Rowan snapped.

“Is that a yes? You’re volunteering?” he asked.

“Yes. Just leave Lyra alone. I turned my back on her once, when she was a baby. I’m not making that mistake again,” Rowan said firmly.

“Aww. Touching. But I really don’t care, so long as I get one of you. And I doubt she’s about to show up and save you—especially after how you treated her,” Dad said smugly.

I glanced at Elias, gave him a nod, and then stepped out from the cover of the trees.

“Wanna bet?” I said, loud enough for all to hear. Every head turned in my direction.

“Well, well. Looks like it’s a full family reunion now, doesn’t it?” Dad said mockingly.

“Too bad not all of us are going to make it out alive,” I replied.

“I know. Your mother just exchanged her life for yours,” Dad said calmly.

“I wasn’t talking about her, asshole. I meant you,” I snapped. His face shifted into stunned disbelief, clearly thrown off by the insult. It was almost like he was trying to make sense of the fact that I’d just cursed at him—as if he still imagined I was the frightened, obedient child who had left him months ago.

“I see your new mate has had quite the influence on you,” he said coolly.

“Yeah. Seems like he has,” I replied without hesitation.

“Begin the ritual,” he ordered the black witch. She gave him a curt nod and turned her attention back to the three captives trapped within the magic circles.

“Mia, don’t do this,” Blair called out, stepping into view from her hiding place.

“Blair,” Mia said, her voice low but full of emotion.

“Don’t go through with this, Mia. I know deep down you’re better than this,” Blair pleaded with her.

“You’re siding with them?” Mia hissed, her gaze snapping toward us with betrayal in her eyes.

“Yes. Because I wanted to pull you out of this madness before you do something you’ll carry with you forever,” Blair said.

“I’ve been waiting to do this for two whole decades. Why would I feel any regret now?” Mia growled, her teeth clenched.

“I was holding out hope that your heart had changed,” Blair said quietly.

“You must have forgotten, dear sister. I don’t have a heart anymore,” Mia said bitterly, raising both hands to the sky and summoning bolts of lightning that came crashing down into the circles again.

Dad was just standing back, watching everything unfold like a show, when Elias quietly gave our warriors the signal to neutralize the enemies guarding the treeline.

One by one, our warriors began vanishing into the trees. And by the time Dad caught on to what was happening, it was far too late to stop them.

My fighters were advancing quickly now, but even that wasn’t enough to stop the black witch from continuing her work.

She stepped closer to Rowan, brandishing a small, wickedly sharp knife. Without hesitation, she began slicing into my mother’s arms and chest.

Rowan cried out in pain, and the scent of her blood hit me hard. But the witch’s cuts were shallow, and they healed rapidly—forcing her to s***h faster and more frequently in hopes that enough blood would spill before it closed up.

I started sprinting toward Rowan and the witch, but out of nowhere, a massive black wolf barreled into me, knocking me violently aside.

I rolled across the ground, dazed. When I looked up, I saw who it was—Dad.

“You’re making the biggest goddamn mistake of your miserable life, old man,” I growled at him.

Suddenly, Elias’s wolf crashed into him from the side, giving me a second to recover. Elias barked at me mentally to go—get to Rowan.

I turned my head and saw it—the portal was beginning to open, spreading out along the ground right beside where my mother stood.

The black witch had started cutting deeper now, and from the portal, bolts of lightning were shooting out in all directions. Every spot they struck, something—some creature—emerged from the other side.

It was working. The ritual was succeeding. And I looked around at the battlefield, watching it all unfold like everything had slowed down to a crawl.

The vampire and the werewolf were still trapped in their circles, both screaming for freedom. Elias and Dad were locked in savage combat. Warriors on both sides were surging in, clashing violently. It was complete chaos. And my mother—she was bleeding out. I could feel her life slipping away.

I stood up, looked around at the madness that surrounded me—and made my decision.

I ran. I didn't stop until I slammed straight into the black witch, tackling her with all the force I could muster.

The impact caught her by surprise and sent both of us tumbling to the ground, but the portal had grown so massive that it pulled us toward its edge.

I felt my legs dangling into the void, the otherworldly pull trying to drag me down. My mother's screams echoed through the clearing, but she was still trapped—sealed behind the magic. She couldn't reach me.

Then I felt it—the black witch's hand grabbing onto my leg. She was trying to climb back up by using me as leverage. But I couldn't allow that.

"Elias. I love you," I called out. I felt his panic and pain explode through the bond the instant I said those words—right before I let go of the edge and surrendered to the fall.

The portal closed behind me as I vanished into the abyss.

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I sensed the precise instant Lyra made the decision to release her grip. Every thought, emotion, and sensation slammed into me like a tidal surge.

and watched my entire

My attention wavered during the fight with Thorne as I looked up and watched world collapse—Lyra had fallen into the portal.

Thorne seized the opportunity, tackled me hard to the ground, and pinned me as he aimed straight for my neck.

All of my strength was focused on keeping him off me, holding him back—until Luke came sprinting over and jumped onto his back, giving me the opening I needed to escape.

“Move, Luke,” I barked. Luke immediately jumped off of Thorne and retreated to a safer distance.

I charged at Thorne and managed to knock him down, but he got to his feet almost immediately.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Luke waiting nearby, poised to jump in again if needed. He wasn’t going to let Thorne win this fight.

Thorne launched himself at me once more, but this time something stopped him—and when I looked, Blair was using her powers to restrain him.

I took the chance, leapt at Thorne, and in one swift motion sank my jaws into his throat and tore it straight from his body.

His corpse dropped to the earth, limp and lifeless, and I felt the shift of energy ripple around me—but I didn’t have time to dwell on it.

I rushed to where the portal had been and realized it had vanished. Nothing remained but solid, undisturbed ground. My wolf instantly began digging in desperation.

All we uncovered was grass and soil—no trace of her, not even a hint.

I slowly began to shift back, though my hands kept digging. I couldn’t stop. I had to find Lyra, bring her back—but she was gone.

I had no idea how long I’d been clawing at the dirt, but a wide hole had formed from the efforts of my wolf and myself.

I didn’t stop until Luke came over and physically pulled me away.

When I looked back, Rowan was still standing in place, tears streaming down her face, while the vampire and the werewolf had already fled.

The first light of dawn was breaking across the sky, and members of Thorne’s pack were cautiously stepping into the clearing.

They clearly understood what had taken place here, though most of them looked terrified. None seemed eager to approach us directly.

Their eyes scanned the area, searching—and I knew immediately they were all looking for Lyra.

One of my warriors handed me a pair of shorts, and after putting them on, I walked straight over to Blair.

"Open the portal," I said firmly.

"I can't," Blair replied quietly.

"Your sister managed to. You're just as strong as she is."

"She spent twenty years perfecting it. She had the right components and tools. The items she used are now gone. And from what I saw, to recreate it, I'd need a vampire, a werewolf, and I'd have to kill Rowan to reopen it," Blair explained.

"Just do something. Anything. Bring her back," Rowan sobbed.

"I'm sorry. I truly am. But I can't. Like I said, we don't have any of the ingredients left," Scarlett said.

"Alpha, we'll find another way. I swear it. We're going to bring our Luna home," Luke said.

"Where exactly did that portal go? Which dimension?" I asked, glancing at Blair and then over at the members of Thorne's pack.

"He never shared anything like that with us," one of them responded.

"All I know is that it leads to a dimension that should never be disturbed. I don't know its name. And with millions of dimensions out there, I have no way of knowing which one she ended up in," Blair said.

"The library—it has books on different dimensions, doesn't it?" I asked Rowan.

"Yes, the ones that have been documented. But Elias, none of them mention anyone actually entering those dimensions," Rowan said.

"So? What's your point?" I asked.

"How do we even know she survived going through it?" Rowan asked.

"Because she's Lyra. She's a damn survivor. She lived through that. We're heading back to the castle, and we're going to figure this out. We'll track down where she is, and we'll find a way to bring her back. Now move," I ordered.

"Alpha, one more thing," Luke said.

"What?" I snapped, turning to him. He looked toward Thorne's pack.

“You killed their Alpha. You would’ve felt the shift. The power went to you. That makes you their Alpha now,” Luke explained.

“I don’t want his pack,” I growled.

“Well, now it’s yours. Look at the way he made them live. I don’t think they were here because they wanted to be. Just look at them,” Luke said.

“Fine. Take them to one of our other safehouses. But they’re your responsibility now,” I said firmly. He nodded in response.

Then I turned and headed back into the woods, running straight toward where we left the vehicles.

I climbed into the driver’s seat, ready to start the engine—but I couldn’t bring myself to do it.

I knew Lyra was in there. The portal had taken her, and I knew deep down she was still inside somewhere. I couldn’t walk away. I didn’t have it in me.

So I got back out of the car and found one of my warriors nearby in the woods.

“I need you to collect every item on this list,” I said, handing him the paper.

It was a list I’d quickly scribbled down—basic camping supplies I’d need—and I headed straight back to the clearing where I’d last seen Lyra.

I had no intention of leaving this place. I gave everyone orders to return to the castle and begin researching.

But I wasn’t going anywhere. I knew Lyra would make her way back to me—if I didn’t get to her first. And I wasn’t about to miss that moment. When that portal opened again, I was going to be here. That was the promise I made—to her and to myself.

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PART TWO – CHAPTER 75

Lyra’s POV

As I began to come to, I slowly pushed myself upright, my eyes scanning my surroundings to realize I was in a place I had never seen before.

Beneath me, the ground felt solid and unyielding. It wasn't soil—it was stone. Sharp, uneven stone. The sky overhead was a flat, endless gray. There was no sunlight, no sign of anything

living.

I gradually got to my feet and started surveying the area around me, only to spot a massive volcano looming not too far in the distance.

When I looked down at where I stood, I realized it wasn't just rock—it was hardened lava. The

surface was cold, but the volcano looked like it might erupt again at any moment.

Instinct kicked in, and I began sprinting in the opposite direction, away from the looming volcano. I reached a slope and climbed it, only to find more desolation—a barren desert stretched out endlessly before me.

There were no signs of trees, no flowing water—nothing but an empty wasteland.

Standing at the peak of the hill I had just climbed, I turned and looked in every direction. Even peering around the volcano, there was still nothing to see.

I knew I didn't have any real options. I had to move. I just needed to decide where to go. That decision alone was the hardest.

Eventually, I chose the direction furthest from the volcano and began the journey, already aware that it was going to be long and grueling. I had no food, no water, no supplies- absolutely nothing.

After walking for what felt like hours, the harshness of the desert began to wear on me.

My mouth was parched, my body exhausted, and every step sent pain through my legs. Still, there was no visible end to the barren landscape.

No movement, no vegetation, nothing living in sight.

This place felt like a true hell dimension—one I didn't understand or recognize.

The only thing I was certain of was that I was completely alone and had to figure out how to get back home. But first...I had to survive. And staying alive in this place would be the greatest obstacle.

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Before long, I noticed shadows flitting across the ground. When I looked up, I saw birds circling high above me.

The sight sparked a bit of hope—birds don't linger in deserts without water or food.

I tried to speed up my pace, though exhaustion made it nearly impossible. Still, I moved in the direction the birds seemed to be flying, hoping they were heading toward something- anything—different.

I'd never laid eyes on this place before, but right now, following them was my only chance to live, so I took the risk.

It wasn't long before I realized something about them was off. Their movements were unpredictable and wild—not like any normal birds I'd seen before.

They began to dip lower, and it was then I noticed just how massive they were. These weren't ordinary birds like the ones back home.

As one came nearer, I saw clearly that it had four talons instead of two, and it was flying closer and closer toward me. It resembled a horse more than any kind of bird.

I watched in horror as it zeroed in on me, and that was when I turned and took off running in the opposite direction.

I was already well aware that bizarre creatures inhabited this place. I'd encountered a few, and if they were any indication of what else lived here, I had absolutely no desire to meet

more.

I tried to escape, to outrun the beast, but there was no chance of succeeding. Its massive front talons clamped onto my shoulders and effortlessly lifted me off the ground.

It soared upward, climbing higher and higher into the sky. I thrashed and resisted, but the sharp claws only sank deeper into my skin, and I felt warm blood trickle down my back.

I couldn't say how long I had been airborne, but eventually I realized we were flying over land filled with trees. I spotted a shimmering lake beneath us, and just the sight of it made my mouth water, but the creature continued to fly much farther than I had hoped.

I noticed now that it wasn't alone—it was flying in formation with others of its kind. When they began to descend toward the earth, the one holding me suddenly released its grip, and I dropped from the sky, falling about twenty feet to the ground.

I hit the earth hard, rolled instinctively, and sprang back to my feet. The creature, along with the others, landed right in front of me.

From this close, I could see their bodies did resemble horses, but with massive feathered

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wings sprouting

was off about them.

We stared at each other for a brief moment, neither side moving.

Then I heard footsteps echoing behind me, coming from the forest. I turned and saw more of those creatures approaching, but these were on foot.

The one at the front looked like he held authority, and he came directly up to me, towering

above me.

"What are you doing here, Your Majesty?" he asked.

"You know who I am?" I responded, surprised.

"Of course. We all know. Just because we live in a different realm doesn't mean we're unaware of who you are," he replied.

"I seriously can't believe I'm having a conversation with a flying horse," I muttered, shaking my head in disbelief.

"There are far more dangerous things in this world than us. You don't belong here," he said.

"Well, it wasn't exactly my plan to end up here. I had no choice," I told him.

"There is always a choice."

"This was the only way to stop the black witch from returning to my world. She tried to murder my mother, my mate, and me. I wasn't going to let her back through," I explained firmly.

“She made it here too?” he asked, concern creeping into his voice.

“I believe so. I was alone when I came to,” I said.

“We know the black witch. She’s been summoning beings from this realm for a long time. We don’t want her here either,” he said grimly.

“Then kill her yourselves. But as for me, I’m going to find my way back. I need to go home,” I said, trying to step past him, but his men blocked my path, preventing me from heading into the forest.

“You won’t last out there on your own,” the leader said.

“Don’t underestimate me,” I shot back.

“Lyra, you’re vital—not just to your world, but to this one too,” he said.

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“Who are you, anyway?” I asked suspiciously.

“We’re called the Aetherion Clan. I am Malric, their leader,” he introduced himself.

“Yeah, I kind of gathered that already,” I muttered.

“Lyra, we can’t allow you to leave just yet,” he said seriously.

More Rewards

“You can’t keep me here. I don’t care what it takes—I’m going to find my way home. Back to my mate,” I declared.

“I understand. And we’ll do what we can to assist you. But you can’t succeed alone. Will you

allow us to help?” he asked.

“Trust isn’t exactly something that comes easily to me,” I admitted.

“Then let us earn it. Let us show you that we mean you no harm,” he said.

“Fine. I’ll stay. But only temporarily. I will return home,” I agreed.

“Thank you. Please, come with me to our camp,” he said.

I glanced around at all the Aetherion creatures surrounding me, realizing that I didn't have much of a choice. So, I began walking with them toward their camp.

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As we began nearing what I assumed was their camp, I could already sense that we were close. I started hearing more sounds—voices, laughter, and the unmistakable sound of children playing. It was nothing like what I had anticipated.

When we stepped out of the dense treeline, I finally caught sight of their home. It was breathtaking—like something out of a fantasy. There weren't any conventional houses, but the people there appeared content, gathered around a lake fed by a cascading waterfall. Flowers I had never encountered before decorated the area, some even seeming to move as if they were alive. Towering trees formed a natural canopy, their branches arching high above us, allowing rays of sunlight to spill through wherever they could. The entire scene was so enchanting that I found myself completely awestruck.

However, it didn't take long before I realized the area had fallen into complete silence. While I had been absorbed in admiring everything around me, the rest of the inhabitants had taken notice of me—and all eyes were now fixed in my direction.

"Malric, I'm so happy you're back," a woman said, hurrying toward him. They touched their foreheads together in what appeared to be their version of a greeting or embrace.

"I promised I'd only be away for a couple of days, my love," Malric replied.

"You said you were just going to scout the area to ensure there were no threats nearby. You never mentioned returning with the Queen," she said, casting a glance in my direction.

"Queen?" I echoed, confused.

"You are the Queen, aren't you?" Malric asked, turning to me.

"I'm not sure, honestly. My mother is still alive," I replied hesitantly.

"We're well aware of her. But she isn't the Queen—you are," he stated firmly.

"Oh... alright then," I responded, still trying to process everything.

"Let me introduce you to my wife. This is Amelia," Malric said, gesturing toward the woman.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," I said politely.

"The pleasure is mine," she said with a graceful bow.

"You don't need to bow to me. But seriously, how does everyone here seem to know who I am?" I asked, bewildered.

"You're the prophesied one. The prophet. Everyone recognizes you because you're destined to save us all," Malric said.

"Save everyone? From what exactly?" I asked, my confusion deepening.

"From the black witch. Though we never expected you to bring her into this world," he added.

"She's here?" Amelia said sharply, fear clearly laced in her voice.

"I understand she's powerful, but why is she such a threat to your realm?" I asked.

"Could you prepare something for the Queen to eat so we may begin dinner?" Malric asked Amelia calmly.

"Certainly," she responded before heading off.

When the meal was ready, everyone gathered around an enormous campfire, which seemed to be their usual place for sharing dinner. I found a spot on a log near the fire, and as we ate, they began telling me everything they knew—things I hadn't had the faintest clue about.

"The black witch has never physically crossed into this dimension before. But she's been summoning beings from here, sending them into your world to carry out her commands," Malric began explaining.

"I'm aware. She's already sent several of them after me. It was at my father's bidding. She wanted to eliminate my mate and drag me back to him," I replied grimly.

"It was common knowledge that the ultimate goal was to merge the two realms. And I don't think I need to explain how catastrophic that would've been. Complete disorder. Utter insanity. But your role was always to prevent that from happening—which you did. The downside is, it left you stranded in this realm... and evidently, it also brought the black witch along," Malric said.

"I truly didn't mean to bring her here. Has anyone seen her yet?" I asked, my tone cautious.

"No, there haven't been any confirmed sightings yet. But rumors are already beginning to spread that she's arrived," Malric said.

"That's unbelievably quick. We only got here earlier today," I responded.

"I understand. But you need to realize something—time flows differently in this world. It doesn't align with the way it works in yours," he explained.

"What do you mean?" I asked him.

"We've always believed that time here runs at a slower pace than it does in your realm.

Though it may feel like half a day to you here, much more time has likely passed back in your world," he told me.

"Damn it. I can't stay in this place. Elias must be losing his mind by now," I muttered.

"I promised you we'd get you home. And we will. But first, we need your help. You have to help us stop the black witch before she tears this realm apart—before she ruins everything pure and good that exists here," Malric urged.

As badly as I wanted to return, I couldn't deny the truth in his words. He was right. I had a responsibility to help them take her down.

I was the reason she ended up here. I couldn't just abandon them to face what I brought into their world. That would be cowardly.

She's wicked and dangerous, and she will wreck anything wholesome in her path without hesitation.

I already knew this world was filled with dangerous beings. The last thing I wanted was to make it worse by leaving her here.

"Alright, then. What do we do? How do we even start looking for her?" I asked.

"We'll need to go out and search for her. But if she's figured out that you're in this realm, then she'll be waiting. And you can bet she'll be ready to throw everything she's got at you," he warned.

"She's already done that before. I survived. I'll do it again if I have to," I said confidently.

"And that's exactly why you're the Queen. You didn't flinch for even a second, another man nearby added.

As night settled over the camp, everyone started to get into their sleeping spots. There were no shelters or buildings—everyone simply slept out in the open. It was like they were permanently living in a campsite.

But I felt restless, too tense to close my eyes.

I made my way over to the lake and stood watching the waterfall as it poured into the still water below. The gentle sound of the rushing water was oddly soothing. Eventually, I sat down beside the lake, resting against the trunk of a tree that stood at its edge.

My eyes scanned the camp where the Aetherion had all laid down. They genuinely looked peaceful, calm. Nothing about them suggested they wanted to harm me. Still, I wasn't about to fully relax around them.

Like I'd told them earlier, trust doesn't come easily to me. I've met far too many people who wore false faces. These creatures could very well be hiding their true intentions too—for all I knew, they might be planning to turn me over to the black witch.

But right now, I didn't have many alternatives. I had to remain here, and I had to give them at least some of my trust—for now.

A few of us were leaving in the morning to begin our search, and I was utterly unfamiliar with this place.

I turned my gaze back to the lake and found myself thinking about Elias—how panicked he must be, not knowing where I was.

"I'm coming, Elias. Please, don't stop believing in me," I whispered. Then I leaned my head back against the tree and slowly closed my eyes, hoping I could finally get some rest.

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I was already awake when the first rays of light began to break through the sky—but I wasn't the only one. A few others had risen early too. Specifically, the women who handled cooking duties for the clan. They were already busy, having gotten a head start on their morning preparations.

Not really having anything else to occupy my time, I stood up and went over to assist them. I could sense their hesitation—clearly uneasy that the Queen would be doing basic chores- but this kind of work didn't bother me at all. I was used to it. It felt normal.

Once Malric was up and moving, he wasted no time gathering his top warriors. Together, we were served our breakfast first.

“So, what’s the game plan for today?” I asked him.

“We’ll begin our journey and try to find someone who might have information on where the witch is hiding,” he replied.

“Wait, that’s your entire strategy?” I asked, not hiding my skepticism.

“Do you happen to have a better suggestion?” he shot back.

“Not really—but only because I don’t know this world or its people. I don’t know who’s friendly and who’s dangerous. You should at least have some clue where to begin without wandering aimlessly and asking random strangers. What if we ask the wrong one and they run off to inform her we’re on her trail? That would only give her time to prepare,” I pointed out.

“She’s actually raising a very valid concern,” another man chimed in.

“And you are?” I asked him.

“Maxwell,” he said in response.

“Well, it’s reassuring to know that at least one of you understands my point of view,” I told

him.

“Alright, then. We’ll begin by checking places and people we already know are trustworthy,” Malric agreed.

That gave me a little comfort. Honestly, I was beginning to worry that these people didn’t really have a concrete plan at all.

It seemed like they were skilled when it came to defending their own—but tracking someone actively hiding from them? That didn’t seem to be their strong suit. And that thought unnerved me a little.

Still, they were all I had to rely on right now.

We set off through the forest, and I was a little surprised when I realized they weren’t going to fly. When I asked about it, they explained that walking would be easier for me—which was thoughtful, though it meant the journey would take longer.

I didn't mind, though. I moved at the pace my feet would allow, and the only thing on my mind was how Elias must be spiraling, worrying about me.

I couldn't sense him here. None of his emotions, no fear, no pull—nothing. So I figured it was probably the same for him.

“Are you feeling alright, Your Majesty?” Malric asked me.

“What?” I said, pulled from my thoughts.

“You’ve been very quiet,” he noted.

“I’m okay. Just... concerned. I really need to get home,” I admitted.

“You promised to help us find the black witch,” he reminded me.

“And I will. I gave you my word. But tell me the truth—do you actually know how to get me home? You made it seem like you did. I just want to hear it straight,” I said.

“Yes. We do know the way back to your realm,” he answered.

“That’s all I needed to hear,” I told him.

It was around midday when we stumbled upon a cavern, seemingly in the middle of nowhere.

There was noise coming from inside—loud and echoing—and Malric and his warriors came to a halt outside, watching it cautiously.

“What’s going on?” I asked, confused.

“We can’t go inside. We’ll have to take a detour,” Malric said.

“Why?” I asked again.

“Because the man who owns that cavern isn’t exactly fond of us,” he explained.

“Wait—are we talking about a man, or some kind of creature?” I asked him.

“He’s human. But he’s gifted. He’s a warlock,” Malric said.

“Stay right here,” I told them as I turned and walked toward the cavern entrance—before anyone had the chance to react or try and stop me.

I pushed open the main door and stepped inside.

My eyes swept over the interior, catching sight of a wide range of bizarre creatures drinking and mingling. Some of them looked truly unsettling—like actual demons. One was green-skinned with sharp horns sprouting from his skull, while another resembled a giant humanoid lizard strolling around.

The moment I entered, every voice fell silent, and all eyes turned in my direction. The room froze. But I didn't let their stares shake me.

I approached the bar and noticed a man leaning against it with a drink in hand.

"Are you the one who runs this place?" I asked him directly.

"Maybe. Royals don't usually darken our doorstep," he replied coolly.

"Well, consider today a rare exception. I need you to tell me anything you know about the black witch," I stated.

"Giving away any information about her? That's a death sentence," he responded without flinching.

"Then not talking might be even worse," I said flatly.

"You really think I'm scared of a little girl?" he scoffed, laughing harshly.

"You should be," I shot back.

"We're well aware of who you are. Everything about you is known in this realm. No secrets survive here. So spare me the intimidation act," he said, voice calm but firm.

"Yeah, I've heard that you people know all there is to know about me. But what you don't know is that ever since I set foot in this place, I've felt this insane power surging through me -like this whole realm is fueling it," I told him, meeting his gaze.

"Your weak little powers don't concern me in the slightest," he said as he stepped away from the bar. Just then, I heard movement behind me as the patrons began shifting out of their seats, backing toward the outer edges of the room.

"I see. So you really think you're superior to me?" I said.

"Damn right I do," he barked, then raised his arms and hurled a bolt of electricity straight at me.

With barely any effort, I raised my hand and redirected the lightning away from my body. At the same time, I lifted my other hand and mentally gripped the warlock's throat—without laying a finger on him.

He lifted into the air, and I slammed him hard onto the top of the bar, flat on his back.

brought both hands back down, then climbed up onto the counter so I was towering over him, looking him dead in the eyes. I pressed the sole of my boot against his neck.

“You’re aware I don’t actually have to lay a hand on you to end your life, right? Now tell me where she is,” I demanded coldly.

The warlock started frantically glancing around at the others inside the cavern, silently pleading for help. But no one dared move. It was clear to everyone there that he was the most powerful among them—and if I could overpower him, then taking down the rest would be nothing.

His eyes finally met mine, filled with desperation. I could feel the heat rising in my own gaze, my irises starting to blaze—but I didn’t look away. I kept them locked on him, letting the red glow burn as bright as it needed to.

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When I stepped out of the cavern, Malric and his soldiers were already waiting there, looking tense and anxious.

“The last he knew, she was staying with someone named Morrigan,” I told them.

“He just told you that?” Maxwell asked, sounding doubtful.

“No. I slammed him onto the bar and threatened to kill him without even touching him. That was after he tried to hit me with an electric bolt. But that’s not the point. Who is Morrigan?” I

asked.

“She’s evil,” Malric said flatly.

“Yeah, I’d already guessed as much,” I replied.

“She’s a Queen in this realm. A cruel, malevolent Queen,” he added.

“Is there ever any other kind in worlds like this?” I asked.

“I didn’t know the black witch had ties to her,” Malric admitted.

“Well, she does. At least she does now. How far is her place from here?” I asked.

"It's at least a full day's walk," he said.

"Alright, then we'd better start moving," I said as I turned and walked back into the forest, the Aetherion soldiers falling in line behind me.

They could clearly tell I was determined now, and I hoped they understood why. I had to get home. I needed to get back to Elias and make sure he was safe. The last thing I'd seen was him locked in battle with my father, and I still had no idea how that fight had ended.

We kept walking well into the night before the soldiers finally decided it was time to set up camp. I tried to talk them into pushing on further, but they were exhausted and needed rest.

One soldier got a fire going while a couple of others headed off to hunt for food.

When they returned, they began skinning the animals they'd caught and roasted them over the flames.

I eventually gave up arguing with them for the night and sat down to eat something as well. They chatted quietly among themselves while I sat there lost in thought, staring off into the distance. Later, when I found a place to sleep, I lay on my back, gazing up at the stars and the moon. I wondered if Isolde could see me here or if her presence was limited only to our own

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world.

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She was the moon goddess, so I chose to believe she could see me even in this realm—and that she could hear what I was thinking. More than that, I hoped she could hear silent

my

pleas.

I was awake at first light, and the others were already beginning to stir.

They busied themselves gathering their supplies while I looked around, trying to get my bearings, hoping to figure out the quickest way to Morrigan's castle.

“Is everything alright?” Maxwell asked.

“Yeah. We should reach Morrigan’s castle today, right?” I asked.

“Yes, though it’s likely another full day’s walk,” he said.

“Alright. I can feel the power radiating from this place—it’s coursing right through me,” I said.

“Yes. This realm is saturated with magic, unlike Earth. But if you’re stronger here...”

“Then so is the black witch. I’ve already thought of that,” I interrupted.

“Good. I just wanted you to be ready for it,” he said.

“Don’t worry. I am,” I said firmly.

We set off once again, with two soldiers walking ahead of me and the rest surrounding me on all sides. I was kept squarely in the center, as if they believed I needed constant protection.

Maybe they just thought it was their responsibility. I wasn’t sure, and honestly, I wasn’t in the mood to argue with them about it.

We had been walking for a few hours when I noticed the Aetherion start to behave oddly. They were sniffing the air, almost like they could sense something that didn’t belong there.

“Stay here, Your Majesty,” one of them instructed.

A few of the soldiers went ahead, and I glanced around at the sparse forest surrounding us. The trees had thinned significantly compared to the dense woods we had traveled through earlier, and now I couldn’t even tell which direction was which. Still, I could sense that trouble was close.

I reached out, trying to detect the same power I had felt before, but I couldn’t find it.

“It’s not the black witch,” I said.

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"No, it's something different. They'll find out what it is and report back," Malric responded.

"It could be anything. The black witch being in Avalon changes everything," he added.

"Avalon? Are you seriously telling me we're about to bump into King Arthur while we're here?"

I asked.

"Probably not. He tends to keep to himself around here," Malric replied, his tone casual. I

stared at him like he had lost his mind.

"King Arthur died hundreds of years ago," I said.

"I'm not sure what they teach in your world, but here, King Arthur is very much alive," he

stated.

"And where exactly is this legendary King while an evil witch is running loose?" I demanded.

"My guess is that he's already occupied, considering the kind of destruction she brings wherever she goes," he said.

"Oh my god," I muttered.

Soon after, the scouts returned, their faces marked with worry.

"What is it?" Malric asked immediately.

"It's the Giants. They've set up camp just over the hill," one soldier reported.

"The Giants never travel this far north," Malric said in disbelief.

"Something must have forced them out of their territory. But they're here now," the soldier confirmed.

"We have to go around. If the Giants catch sight of us, we won't stand a chance," Malric said.

"Do they work for the witch or for Morrigan?" I asked.

“No. They work for no one. But that doesn’t mean they’re harmless. They’ll devour anything that crosses their path,” he explained.

“Yeah, going around them sounds like the best plan,” I agreed.

So we veered left, attempting to skirt around their camp while keeping as silent as possible. We paid careful attention to every step we took.

Giants had exceptional hearing, and even the smallest twig snapping beneath our feet could alert them and send them straight after us.

I felt sweat gathering on my skin as we crept past their camp, the tension in the air almost

unbearable.

I could faintly make them out in the distance, though calling it “faintly” was a stretch. They were so massive it was impossible to miss them.

The Giants had clearly established a camp, and they looked like complete savages. Like wild beasts. They were fighting viciously among themselves over a piece of livestock that one of them had captured, each one battling for the right to finish it off.

Then, suddenly, something else caught their attention.

“Do you smell that?” one of them asked, standing to his full towering height.

“I sure do. Royal blood,” another growled.

“What the hell?” I whispered under my breath.

“They can smell you. Get behind me, Your Majesty,” Malric ordered.

“You are not dying for me. You have a family,” I said firmly.

“And I promised to get you home to yours. You’re the only one capable of defeating the witch,

he countered.

“And what if you die? You won’t be able to get me home,” I said.

“My people can,” he insisted.

“I said you are not dying in front of me. We can start running,” I told him.

“We’ll never outrun them,” he replied grimly as the Giants began moving toward us.

“Well, there’s no harm in trying,” I said, striking his side, which caused him to rear back before bolting past the Giants’ camp. The rest of the group immediately followed.

One of the soldiers grabbed me mid-stride and threw me onto his back, realizing I couldn’t keep up while running.

He launched into the air, flying higher and higher and picking up speed—but it wasn’t fast enough.

I saw a massive giant hand come hurtling toward us, sweeping in from ahead, and it knocked us brutally out of the sky.

We crashed hard to the ground, and as my vision began to blur, I saw one of the enormous Giants striding toward us. That was the last thing I saw before everything went black and I

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I had no idea how long I’d been out, but when I finally blinked awake, the sun was still shining. It couldn’t have been that long.

“Well, well, look who’s awake,” a voice rumbled behind me, deep and mocking.

I twisted my neck to see one of the giants sitting right behind me. Thick ropes pinned me to the ground.

“What do you want?” I asked flatly.

“Nothing at all,” he said with an infuriating smirk.

“Sure. You went to the trouble of tying me up for ‘nothing.’”

“You were trespassing on our territory,” he shot back.

“Funny. From what I’ve heard, this isn’t even your land,” I replied coldly.

“Things change when you drag the black witch into Avalon. Thanks to you, we’ve been forced

out of our home.”

"Where's Malric?" I demanded, craning my neck.

"Busy," he said, the corner of his mouth curling upward. "Very, very busy."

The way he said it made my stomach twist.

"I didn't come here to bring the black witch," I said quickly. "We're hunting her. I plan on killing her."

The giant erupted into a booming laugh, and the others joined in.

"You?" he scoffed. "Kill her? That's rich."

"I already forced her out of my world once," I said evenly. "Why shouldn't I believe I can finish the job?"

That made him pause, his laughter dying as he studied me. He must have realized I wasn't bluffing.

"No one can defeat the black witch," he said finally, his voice lower now. "Not in this realm. And certainly not now that she's allied with the evil Queen. You're dreaming."

"I didn't think giants were so terrified of two women," I taunted, narrowing my eyes. "Guess I

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was wrong. You just bully the weaker folk of Avalon because you're too scared to fight real threats. Pathetic."

The insult hit its mark. He rose to his full height, towering over me, trying to intimidate me.

"People say the Queen of your world is insane," he growled.

"You don't know the half of it," I said calmly, though my pulse was hammering.

While he postured, I'd quietly maneuvered my bound hands into position. With a small spark of magic, I burned clean through the ropes without making a sound.

I stayed perfectly still, pretending I was still tied, waiting for the right opening.

I noticed other giants scattered across the clearing, their massive shapes looming in the background. Then, from the forest, came the unmistakable sound of screams—Malric and Maxwell. My chest tightened. They were being tortured, and it was because of me. I needed

to reach them.

The giant strolled around to my side, a cruel smile tugging at his mouth. “Sounds like my friends are having a great time with yours,” he said, nodding toward the forest.

“Not as much fun as I’m about to have with you,” I hissed.

He spun around at the sound of my voice now coming from behind him. I was already standing, my hands glowing with blazing fireballs.

His expression hardened, but before he could react, I threw my arms wide. Fire exploded from my palms, searing through the clearing and setting everything the giants owned ablaze -their hoarded food, their crude piles of clothing, every last scrap.

The other giants scrambled to douse the flames, but the fire was far too intense. Every time they got close, their skin seared, forcing them to retreat with pained roars.

“Do you have any idea what dragon fire feels like?” I asked, my voice cutting through the chaos.

The giant in front of me froze. “Dragon... fire? You can’t-”

“Yeah,” I interrupted, my hands glowing hotter. “Still think I can’t take down the black witch?”

His eyes flicked nervously to his companions, then back to me. I aimed my fire-laced hands directly at his chest, and he instinctively stumbled back. He wasn’t brave enough to test me.

“Take me to my friends,” I ordered.

He hesitated, jaw clenching, but eventually gave a stiff nod and trudged toward the forest. I

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followed a few steps behind, my palms blazing the entire way.

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We reached a clearing where Malric and the others were strung upside down, their bodies battered and bloodied. They stared at me wide-eyed, stunned I was even standing there.

“Cut them down,” I demanded.

The giant shot a look over his shoulder. “Do it,” he barked at his own.

One by one, the Aetherion were freed, collapsing to the ground and then staggering over to

1. me.

“They’re not going to let this slide,” Malric rasped, wiping blood from his mouth. “They’ll come after you.”

“I know,” I said, glancing back at the smoke rising from the ruins of their camp. “I just destroyed their supplies. I gave them a reason to.”

“You didn’t just anger them,” Malric said grimly. “You’ve enraged the giants.”

“You know what needs to be done,” Maxwell said, his tone dark.

I turned to face the group of towering figures glaring at me, their faces twisted with hatred. But I wasn’t here to slaughter them. All I had wanted was to free us and keep moving toward Morrigan’s castle.

Malric’s expression was hard. He clearly didn’t share my hesitation. “Lyra, they won’t let us leave. They’ll track us and butcher us before we ever get close to Morrigan.”

“I’m not a cold-blooded killer,” I said firmly.

“I know you’re not,” Malric replied, voice low. “But they are. And if we leave them alive, they’ll slaughter us all. We can’t risk it.”

“You call yourselves a peaceful race,” I snapped.

“We are. But protecting Avalon outweighs our ideals,” Malric said, unwavering.

“No,” I said, my hands trembling at my sides. “What you really want is for me to do the dirty work for you.”

“We can’t kill them,” Malric said. “You can.”

I looked back at the giants. They stood defiant, trying to mask their fear. They knew the fire in my hands could end them all.

I didn't want this. I didn't come here to burn anyone alive, not unless it was the black witch.

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But Malric was right: if we let them live, they would hunt us relentlessly.

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My gaze met the leader's. His expression had softened, like he was silently pleading with me

not to do it.

But I wasn't naïve. I wouldn't let his act fool me. He and the others would be on our heels the

second we left.

And there was only one way to make sure that didn't happen.

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Luke POV

I'd managed to fully integrate Thorne's former pack with Elias's, and they were finally pulling their weight at the castle.

Those still fiercely loyal to Thorne were either dead or locked away in the castle's dungeon- and that dungeon was no joke. It was the largest, most secure prison I had ever seen, built in such a way that escape was utterly impossible. But even so, we had guards stationed at every entrance and corridor, just in case.

Once I'd seen to every piece of pack business that needed handling, I decided it was time to head back to North Carolina. My destination was that same cursed field—the one where Lyra

had vanished.

When I arrived, the place was eerily quiet. A solitary tent was pitched near the center of the field, but there was no sign of life around it.

I scoured the area for a while, searching for any trace of Elias, but came up empty. So I settled at the entrance of the tent and waited. And waited. Hours passed until the sun had nearly dipped below the horizon.

Finally, I heard footsteps behind me.

“What are you doing here?” Elias’s voice was low and rough.

I rose to my feet and turned to face him. He was nearly unrecognizable. His beard had grown thick and wild, and his clothes—tattered and dirty—were the same ones he’d been wearing the day Lyra disappeared. In his hands, he carried two freshly killed rabbits, no doubt his dinner.

“Everyone at the castle has been asking about you,” I said quietly.

“You know what to tell them,” Elias muttered, walking past me and crouching by the firepit to start skinning the rabbits.

“I know what you told me to tell them,” I said sharply. “But you never came back when you said you would,”

“I never told you when I was coming back,” Elias replied flatly, not even glancing my way.

“Elias... are you really just going to sit here waiting for Lyra? What if she can’t come back?” I

asked.

He froze for just a second before speaking again. “Then you don’t know Lyra as well as I do.

She’ll come back. She’ll find her way to me. I believe that with everything I have left.”

“It’s been three weeks,” I reminded him. “There hasn’t been a single sign that the portal is even trying to open. We’ve gone through every book in the castle, every spell, every scrap of information we could find, and nothing. There’s nothing about opening portals to other

realms.”

“I know,” Elias said simply. “Which means it’s in her hands now. She’s the one with the magic. She’ll come back when she can.”

I stepped closer. "You need to come home. The pack needs its Alpha."

"I'm not their Alpha right now," he said coldly. "Not until she's back. Just... keep doing what you're doing. And leave me the hell alone."

I sighed, defeated. "Fine. I'll come back in a couple of weeks and see if you've come to your senses by then."

"I wouldn't hold my breath if I were you," Elias replied without looking up.

I left him to his fire and his solitude, heading back to the road where my car was parked. By the time I pulled up to the castle, night had fully fallen.

"Well?" Liam asked as soon as I walked in.

"He's not budging," I admitted. "At least not yet. He's absolutely convinced Lyra will find her way back to him."

"He needs to believe that," Rowan said softly. "It's the only thing keeping him going."

"I know," I said, rubbing a hand over my face. "But isolating himself out there isn't doing him any favors."

"What's the plan?" Corbin asked.

"There is no plan," I said firmly. "He's our Alpha, and he just lost his mate. We'll let him grieve the way he needs to. In the meantime, I'll take care of everything that needs to be handled around here."

The others nodded solemnly, bowing their heads in quiet acknowledgment.

I headed to the kitchen to grab something to eat, and Rowan quietly slipped into the room behind me. She looked hesitant, almost shy, like she'd been working up the courage to say something.

"What's going on?" I asked, turning to face her.

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"Well... you know how there are second-chance mates?" Rowan began, fidgeting with her hands.

"Yeah," I said slowly.

"I found mine," she admitted, a small smile tugging at her lips. "He was in Thorne's pack this whole time. He lost his mate a few years ago, and I... I guess we just found each other."

"That's great, Rowan. Who is he?" I asked.

"His name is Reeve," she said softly.

"Oh yeah, I remember him," I replied with a nod.

Rowan's expression sobered, and her voice faltered. "I wish Lyra were here to see this. I know she hated me... or at least, that's how it felt. But she... she died to protect me."

I shook my head. "We don't know that, Rowan. She fell into a portal that leads to another world. That's the one thing I fully agree with Elias about—she could still be alive."

"We both know the horrors of that realm," she whispered. "There's no guarantee she's making

it out of there alive."

"Then maybe you need to have a little more faith in your daughter," I said firmly.

Rowan pressed her lips together, but she didn't argue. Instead, she hesitated again before saying, "I overheard some of your men talking earlier. They mentioned a pack that's been mistreating their omegas. Some of them are planning to go and rescue them."

"Where are they now?" I asked sharply.

"They went to the war room," she answered.

I immediately left the kitchen and headed down the hall. When I entered the war room, I found some of our best soldiers gathered around the large table, maps and aerial images spread out in front of them.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"We need to get back to why this pack was formed in the first place," Chris explained. "'A pack about two hours away has been reported for abusing their omegas.'"

"Alright," I said. "All you had to do was come to me with this. I would've approved the mission. This is exactly why we started this pack in the first place. It's a good idea—go. Now, how many omegas are we talking about?"

“At least twenty,” Chris said. “Maybe more.”

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“Then you’ll need a couple of vans to bring them back, I instructed.

More Rewards >

“That’s what we were thinking,” he agreed. “We’re reviewing aerial views of the pack’s territory now, trying to figure out the best way in and how we can get the omegas out quickly.”

I sat down at the table and leaned over the maps with them. For the next couple of hours, we worked on the details until we finally had a plan we were confident in.

“What about the Alpha?” Chris asked quietly.

“He just needs more time,” I said, my jaw tightening.

“Alright. We’ll let you know when we’re on our way back,” Chris replied, and I nodded before watching them file out.

After they left, I stepped outside to the massive clearing beside the castle. Where once it had been nothing but open space, it was now slowly transforming into something extraordinary- a village.

Workers were everywhere, busy hammering, hauling, and lifting. From where I stood, I could see the skeletal frames of large medieval-style buildings taking shape. We’d decided on apartment-style housing instead of single-family homes so everyone could fit comfortably.

I stood there for a moment, tall and proud of the progress we were making. It meant that the people we’d rescued and the ones from Thorne’s pack wouldn’t have to camp outside forever. Soon, they’d each have a home-somewhere they could call their own.

But as I looked out over the construction site, a single thought weighed heavy on me:

Now we needed to figure out how to bring our Alpha back.