

The Lost Lycan Princess

Chapter 4 Blood on Stone

For a long heartbeat, no one moved.

The wind tugged at Lina's hair, carrying the faint scent of damp earth and old ashes. The rune in the ground glowed softly, fading in and out like a dying ember.

THE HEIR LIVES.

Kael's fingers dug into her shoulders. Not hard enough to hurt—but hard enough to tell her he'd forgotten to pretend he wasn't shaken.

"Who carved that?" he demanded.

Lina tore her gaze from the rune. "Someone who knew the Valerius language."

"Don't play games with me."

"I'm not." Her throat felt too tight. "Only my tribe used this script. We didn't teach it outside our borders."

Riven scanned the trees, hand on the hilt of his blade. "Alpha, this could be a trap. Old magic, old curses... someone could be trying to bait us."

Lina rose slowly to her feet. Her legs felt unsteady, as if the earth itself had shifted beneath her. Now she was crying. Tears falling freely on her beautiful face.

"The bait," she said, "would need to already be here."

Riven's eyes flashed at the implication. "You."

"Yes," she said simply.

Kael stepped around her, crouching to study the rune. His fingers hovered just above the glowing lines, close enough to feel the thrum of power rising from the ground.

"It reacted to you," he said quietly.

Lina swallowed. "It reacted to my bloodline."

"Which suggests," he went on, "that someone tied this spell to your return."

He straightened, gaze pinning her. “Do you care to explain how that’s possible if your people were wiped out?”

Lina stared past him, toward where the village had once stood.

“I can't. But not everyone was wiped out you know. most of the royal family, or healers, magicians that were on our side, they all survived. They just didn't cross over with me.”

He looked at her with disbelief but at this point everything seemed unreal so he just kept to himself.

Her feet carried her forward before she had time to think.

Where homes had once formed a tight circle, only broken foundations remained—stones half-buried in wild grass, outlines of rooms now filled with weeds. A shattered well lay collapsed in on itself, its stones scattered like teeth knocked from a jaw.

The air still smelled of smoke, somehow, even after centuries. Or maybe that was just memory clinging to her lungs.

“This was the training yard,” she murmured, more to herself than to the two males following. “We used to line up here at dawn. Father said no Valerius wolf ever woke later than the sun.”

Kael’s steps softened behind her.

“And here,” she went on, moving to a fallen stone slab, “was the council hall. The elders liked to argue. I... listened from the windows.”

“You were a child,” Kael said quietly.

Lina’s lips twisted. “In blood, yes. In expectations... not so much.”

The slab’s underside bore another carved symbol, finer and more intricate. Before the fire, it would have marked the entrance—All who enter here serve the moon and the tribe.

Now it lay sideways, charred on one edge.

She crouched, trailing her fingers over the grooves. Her wolf pressed forward, keen and aching. This had been their center. Their heart.

Her gaze shifted to a stone hearth, blackened with soot, half standing.

“There,” she whispered. “My mother used to make honey bread on the fifth moon of every cycle. Said it kept the forest spirits happy.”

Riven was silent. For once he didn't scoff.

Kael watched her carefully. "The records say the Valerius wielded magic no other Lycans had. That you consorted with witches."

Lina's head snapped up. "Is that what they told you?"

"That you allied with power that didn't belong to wolves," he said. "That you betrayed the Dominion."

A laugh scraped out of her, raw and humorless. "We were the Dominion before you, you know. Before your line took the throne. And guess what, you took the throne using the power of the same witches that you now seem to dislike, but then it was convenient wasn't it?"

Riven stiffened. "Mind your tongue."

"Or what?" Her gaze hardened. "You'll kill me for speaking the truth after your ancestors killed us for existing?"

Kael's jaw flexed. "Careful."

Lina stood, facing him fully. "You dragged me out here to look at the bones of my people. Don't be surprised if my manners are buried under my grief."

A gust of wind swept through the ruins, stirring old dust. For a moment, Lina almost heard children laughing—her cousins, her packmates—before the echo dissolved into silence.

She drew a steadying breath.

"Your 'records'," she said, "were written by the wolves who slaughtered us. Did you really think they'd paint us kindly?"

Kael didn't answer.

He didn't have to.

The rune at their feet pulsed again, as if agreeing with her.

"Why would anyone leave a message like that?" Riven muttered. "And why now?"

Lina shook her head, frustration twisting inside her. "I don't know. I was alone. The night of the attack, I—"

Memory slammed into her.

Flames licking at wooden beams.

Howls turning to screams.

Her father shoving her toward the trees.

Her mother pressing a kiss to her forehead, her face streaked with blood.

Run, Lina. Run and don't look back.

She had looked back anyway.

She'd seen a wolf bigger than any she'd known—coat dark as shadow, eyes burning gold—tear through Valerius warriors like they were nothing.

Her chest tightened.

She hadn't seen his face as a man. Only as a wolf. Only those eyes.

Golden, like Kael's.

Her breathing stuttered.

Kael watched her closely. "What do you remember?"

"Enough," she said.

"Tell me."

Lina's nails bit into her palms. "I remember betrayal. I remember your throne being paid for in Valerius blood."

Riven snarled. "You speak as if we wielded the blade."

"If you wear the crown, you wear the guilt."

"That crown was built on order," Riven shot back. "On ending the chaos your line started."

"Our 'chaos,'" Lina hissed, "was protecting the border from things your books won't even remember anymore. We were the ones that protected you. The lycans. You were weak."

Kael stepped between them, voice like a cut of ice. "Enough. Both of you."

Riven clamped his jaw shut, muscles jumping.

Lina forced herself to breathe.

“Why are you really here, Alpha?” she asked. “You say you want answers. Fine. So do I. So let’s start with the simple one—why was my tribe marked for death?”

Kael met her gaze, and for once didn’t look away.

“I don’t know.”

The honesty in it startled her.

“You’re lying,” she said automatically.

“I’m not.” His tone was low, tight. “I was born long after this. I inherited a history already written. My grandfather fought in that war. My father enforced the aftermath. I grew up hearing that Valerius lycans were monsters with too much power and no loyalty.”

“And you believed that.”

“What choice did I have?” he snapped, temper finally cracking. “That’s all we were taught. The curse, the forest, the way anyone who got too close never returned—your tribe became a story to frighten pups. ‘Stay inside the walls or the Valerius ghosts will drag you away in the night.’”

Lina flinched.

Ghosts.

Is that all they were now? A warning in children’s tales?

“Then why keep the ruins standing?” she whispered. “Why not raze this place completely?”

Kael’s gaze slid around them, to the broken stones and half-buried foundations.

“Because some scars,” he said quietly, “are meant to remind us what happens when power goes wrong.”

The words hit her like a slap.

“Is that what we are to you?” she asked. “A lesson?”

“I don’t know what you are yet.” His voice softened. “That’s the problem.”

The rune pulsed again.

Lina exhaled slowly. “The magic here is old. It might react stronger if I—”

She broke off at a faint sound: a soft crunch, like a footstep.

Her lycan’s head snapped up. We’re not alone.

Kael heard it too. In a blink, his posture shifted—looser and deadlier at once. Riven’s blade flashed halfway from its sheath.

Lina turned toward the sound.

A figure stood in the shadow of a broken pillar at the edge of the ruins.

For a second, Lina thought it was a trick of light—a remnant, a memory. Tall, cloaked, face hidden beneath a hood. The air around them shimmered faintly, the way it had near the Veil.

“Who’s there?” Kael demanded.

The figure didn’t answer.

Riven took a step forward. “Alpha—”

Lina’s heart slammed against her ribs. Something about that presence tugged at her—not familiar, but entwined with the same magic as the forest. As the curse. As her.

“Don’t move,” she said under her breath.

But it was too late.

Kael strode toward the shadow, every line of him a warning. “This is restricted territory,” he called. “By order of the Alpha, reveal yourself.”

The hooded figure slowly lifted their head.

Lina couldn’t see their face, but she felt their eyes on her. Felt that stare like cold fingers wrapping around her spine.

And then, in a voice that sounded like wind scraping over stone, they said, “The heir steps on blood she does not remember.”

The world tilted.

Lina’s wolf bared its teeth.

Kael froze. “Who are you?”

The figure's head turned toward him. "You wear the Arden name," they said. "Yet you walk blind through the ashes your line created."

Riven's snarl cut the air. "I'll gut you for that—"

Lina moved without thinking, stepping between them.

"Who are you?" she asked.

The figure lowered their hood.

They were older—far older than anyone she'd seen outside the forest. Their hair fell in long, silver waves, streaked through with black. Their skin was the kind that came from years, not magic—lined, weathered, but their eyes...

Their eyes were bright, sharp, and burning violet.

Witch.

Her wolf stiffened. Magic-blood.

"You," Kael bit out. "You're trespassing in Lycan territory. This land is under—"

"This land," the witch said calmly, "does not belong to you. It is scarred by oaths your ancestors broke and promises mine were forced to keep but betrayed."

Lina's hands curled.

"You know me," she said.

The witch's gaze softened the slightest fraction. "I know what you are."

"What am I?"

"The last thread in a pattern that was supposed to be cut," they said. "The one the forest refused to surrender. The one the curse was built around."

Kael stepped closer, placing himself half a step in front of Lina, as if to shield—or restrain—her. "Explain."

The witch's lips twitched. "Arden Alphas. Always commanding. Never asking." They tilted their head. "You want the truth, boy? You won't like it."

"Try me."

The witch's gaze flicked between them—the Alpha standing rigid with fury, the heir shaking with barely contained grief and rage.

“The Valerius tribe,” she said slowly, “was not destroyed because they consorted with witches.”

Lina's heart thudded.

“They were destroyed,” the witch continued, “because they refused to sign away their power to a throne that feared anything it couldn't control.”

Kael's face went still.

“No,” he said. “That's not—”

“That's not what your books say?” the witch asked. “I'm sure. History is always kinder to the victor.”

Riven swore under his breath. “Why should we believe you?”

“Because I was there,” the witch said simply.

The world narrowed.

Lina's breath caught. “You... what?”

They looked at her, and something like sorrow moved in their eyes. “I walked these paths before your parents were born. I stood in this very clearing when your father offered his blood under the moon, swearing to protect the Dominion from what stirs beyond.”

Lina's knees nearly buckled.

“My father made a pact?” she whispered. “With you?”

“With my circle,” the witch corrected. “We bound the border. We sealed away things that feed on chaos. We held the line so your world could sleep safe.”

“Then why—” Lina's voice cracked. “Why did you let them die?”

Pain flickered across the witch's face. “Do you think it was our choice?”

Kael's hands curled into fists.

“If what you say is true,” he said grimly, “then why curses? Why a forest that devours our scouts? Why legends of Valerius horrors?”

“Because when the war came,” the witch answered, “your grandfather demanded the Valerius share their power. They refused. The Council called it treason. They chose to ‘remove the threat.’”

Lina’s vision blurred.

Fire.

Screams.

Golden eyes watching while everything burned.

“The magic binding the border,” the witch went on softly, “was tied to your father’s blood. When he died, the spell faltered. It needed an anchor. A living line.”

Her gaze locked on Lina’s.

“You were that line.”

Lina’s stomach bottomed out.

“The forest took you,” the witch said, “because we begged it to. Because if the border fell completely, this kingdom would have been swallowed by what lurks beyond. Your life held the curse together.”

Riven stared, stunned. “You mean—”

“You turned a child into a living seal?” Kael’s voice was low, lethal. “You imprisoned her for centuries?”

“To save your world,” the witch snapped. “The choices were slaughter the Valerius entirely... or leave a single heir bound to magic too old to break. We tried to find another way. We also managed to save a lot of your people but they did not cross over in whole. The best parts of their spirits is still here. Locked inside these ruins.”

Lina thought of all the times her parents seemed different. How she gave up on them because they seemed hollow. At the time she thought it was despair. Pain. Now she realises it was only part of them there.

“You had three hundred years.”

“It was not three hundred calm years, girl,” the witch said, eyes hard. “The forest isn’t the only thing that hungers. The Council grew stronger. The throne changed hands. Every time we pushed to free you, we were threatened with being hunted down like your tribe.”

“Convenient,” Kael muttered. “Blame the Council for what witches did with their own hands.”

The witch’s gaze cut to him, sharp. “Not all witches. You conveniently leave out the ones that helped you. You think we wanted this? We are bound by our own oaths. Your line demanded we keep the border sealed. They didn’t care how. They only cared the threat stayed away from their walls.”

Lina wrapped her arms around herself, as if that could keep her from splintering.

“So I was...” She swallowed. “I was a weapon. A wall.”

“A shield,” the witch said softly. “You were a shield, Valerius girl. Not a weapon. Never a weapon.”

It didn’t feel like a difference.

Kael’s jaw clenched hard enough to crack. “Who left the rune?”

“I did,” the witch replied.

“Why now?”

“Because the forest screamed last night,” they said. “Because the Veil vanished. Because your heir finally stepped out of her chains, and the balance we bled to keep is gone.”

They turned their face toward the trees, toward the line where the cursed forest had once swirled against the world.

“Without her anchoring it,” they murmured, “something will come looking for the gap.”

Lina’s blood went cold.

Kael took a slow breath, as if holding himself together slice by slice.

“What kind of ‘something’?” he asked.

The witch smiled, but there was no humor in it.

“The kind your records don’t mention,” they said. “Because if they did, your people would never sleep through the night again.”

Silence fell, thick as smoke.

Lina’s world had already shifted once when she stepped through the Veil. Now it shattered again, the pieces rearranging into a picture she hated.

Her tribe had died to protect a kingdom that called them traitors.

She had been left alive to hold together magic for wolves who didn't remember her name.

And now, freed at last, she was the reason that same kingdom might be exposed to what lurked beyond.

Kael closed the distance between himself and the witch until they were nearly nose to nose.

"If what you say is true," he said, voice low and dangerous, "then you will come back to the fortress. You will tell the Council exactly what you just told us. And we will decide what to do with this... 'gap.'"

The witch laughed softly. "You still think you're the one deciding, Arden boy."

Kael's eyes flashed. "Is that a refusal?"

"It is a warning," they replied. "The Council will not welcome truth that stains their hands. They'll try to silence it. And they will not hesitate to remove the last Valerius if they discover what she is."

Lina's heart stuttered.

Kael's gaze flicked to her.

The witch watched the exchange carefully. "You want to protect your pack," she said. "Good. Then listen to me—hide her. Train her. She is more than a bloodline. She is the only one who can do what your dead kings demanded and your living Council benefits from."

"And what is that?" Riven demanded.

The witch's eyes burned violet, her voice dropping to a once-in-a-century weight.

"Stand between this world and the dark," they said. "Like her father did. Like his father before him. Only this time... she will not do it alone."

She looked at Kael.

Not at his title. Not at his scars.

At him.

"You have always loved control, Arden wolf," she murmured. "The moon has a cruel sense of humor—tying your fate to the one line your ancestors tried to erase."

Lina's lycan went completely still.

Kael's expression slammed shut, as if the witch had reached into his chest and ripped out something he wasn't ready to examine.

"What are you implying?" he growled.

The witch's lips curved.

"Ask your wolf," they said softly. "And hers." There was no need to ask anyone anything. He knew. He already knew. Yet he was not accepting it. His pack came first and when she finally realised that they were fated mates he would reject her.

Before anyone could move, the ground shuddered again. Wind whipped through the ruins, biting cold, thick with power. The witch's outline blurred, her form dissolving like smoke in a gale.

"Wait!" Lina shouted, stepping forward.

Her voice echoed faintly around her, already fading.

"Find the truth buried in your own house, Valerius girl," it whispered. "The answers you seek aren't in these stones. They're sitting on the throne that replaced yours."

And then she was gone.

The ruins were quiet again.

Only the rune remained, a dull glow in the dirt, like the last ember of a once-roaring fire.

Riven swore under his breath. "I hate witches."

Kael said nothing.

He stood very still, staring at the space where the witch had vanished, jaw clenched, eyes storm-dark.

Lina's pulse hammered.

"Alpha," Riven said cautiously. "We should report this. The Council—"

"The Council," Kael cut in, voice suddenly ice-cold, "will hear exactly as much as I decide to tell them."

Riven stiffened. "But—"

“I said,” Kael repeated, turning slowly to face him, “I decide.”

Riven dropped his gaze. “Yes, Alpha.”

Kael looked back at Lina.

She could feel his wolf pushing against his skin, restless, unsettled... drawn. Her own wolf rose to meet it, no matter how she tried to shove it down but she was still masking their presence.

“You are coming back to the fortress,” he said.

Lina let out a shaky breath. “And then what?”

His eyes burned into hers.

“Then,” he said quietly, “we decide whether we’re going to let the thing beyond that broken border tear us apart...”

He stepped closer, so close she could feel the heat of him, the weight of his power.

“...or stand with the heir my ancestors tried to erase.”

Her Lycan's answer was instantaneous.

Ours.

Lina's heart lurched.

She didn't know yet if that was a blessing—or the cruelest twist of fate the moon had ever written.