410 THE AMBUSH 1

The moon was a thin sliver in the ink-black sky, offering little light as Xaden sat by the fire, sharpening his blade with slow, deliberate strokes. 1

He had his men had decided that it was time for them to make camp after traveling non stop for hours.

He cleaned his sword absent mindedly as he thought of Jasmine and their unborn baby.

He had hated to see how she looked at him when it was time for him to leave.

Like she felt something was wrong.

He shook his head off it.

He wanted to talk to Erik about it and then relieved Erik was not with him but rather back home in the pack.

So Xaden sighed and sat back down.

His men who had accompanied him sat in a loose circle around the fire, they were laughing together and discussing their days and times they had had together.

Then they felt a chill and they went quiet.

The night was too quiet. No distant howls, no rustling of small creatures in the underbrush. It was unnatural.

Owen who was always making jokes about everyone became quiet.

Something was coming.

Xaden felt it in his bones.

He lifted his gaze to the forest beyond their camp, watching as the wind stirred the trees. The rival pack had been a thorn in his side for too long, striking from the shadows, stealing, killing.

But this time, it would end. He had ridden out to break them, to crush them so they would never threaten his pack again.

And yet, something about tonight felt wrong.

"Alpha Xaden."

Caleb's low voice broke the silence. He was one of Xaden's most trusted warriors, a seasoned fighter with more scars than men twice his age.

He crouched beside Xaden, his sharp eyes scanning the darkness.

"We should double the watch," he murmured. "The air is thick with something... off."

Xaden nodded. "Do it."

Caleb rose and moved off to wake the other guards. Xaden continued sharpening his sword, but his grip had tightened. He trusted his instincts, and right now, they screamed at him.

Then it hit.

A faint scent on the wind.

Blood.

Not fresh—old, but strong.

Xaden froze. His pulse thundered in his ears as he stood, gripping his weapon. A moment later, the first arrow sliced through the night.

It struck one of his men in the throat.

The warrior jerked, his mouth opening in shock as he clutched at the shaft protruding from his neck. A strangled sound escaped his lips before he collapsed, unmoving.

Silence.

Then chaos.

Another arrow. Then another. The air was alive with the sharp whistle of death.

Xaden's men scrambled to their feet, shouting warnings, drawing weapons. The forest erupted

as figures burst from the shadows—warriors from the rival pack, their faces painted with ash and blood.

Xaden moved like lightning. He dodged an incoming strike and slashed his blade across the attacker's chest. Blood sprayed as the man crumpled, but another was already lunging at him.

Clang.

Xaden blocked the strike, twisting to drive his dagger into the enemy's ribs. A wet gasp. The man sagged. Xaden shoved him away and turned, searching for his warriors.

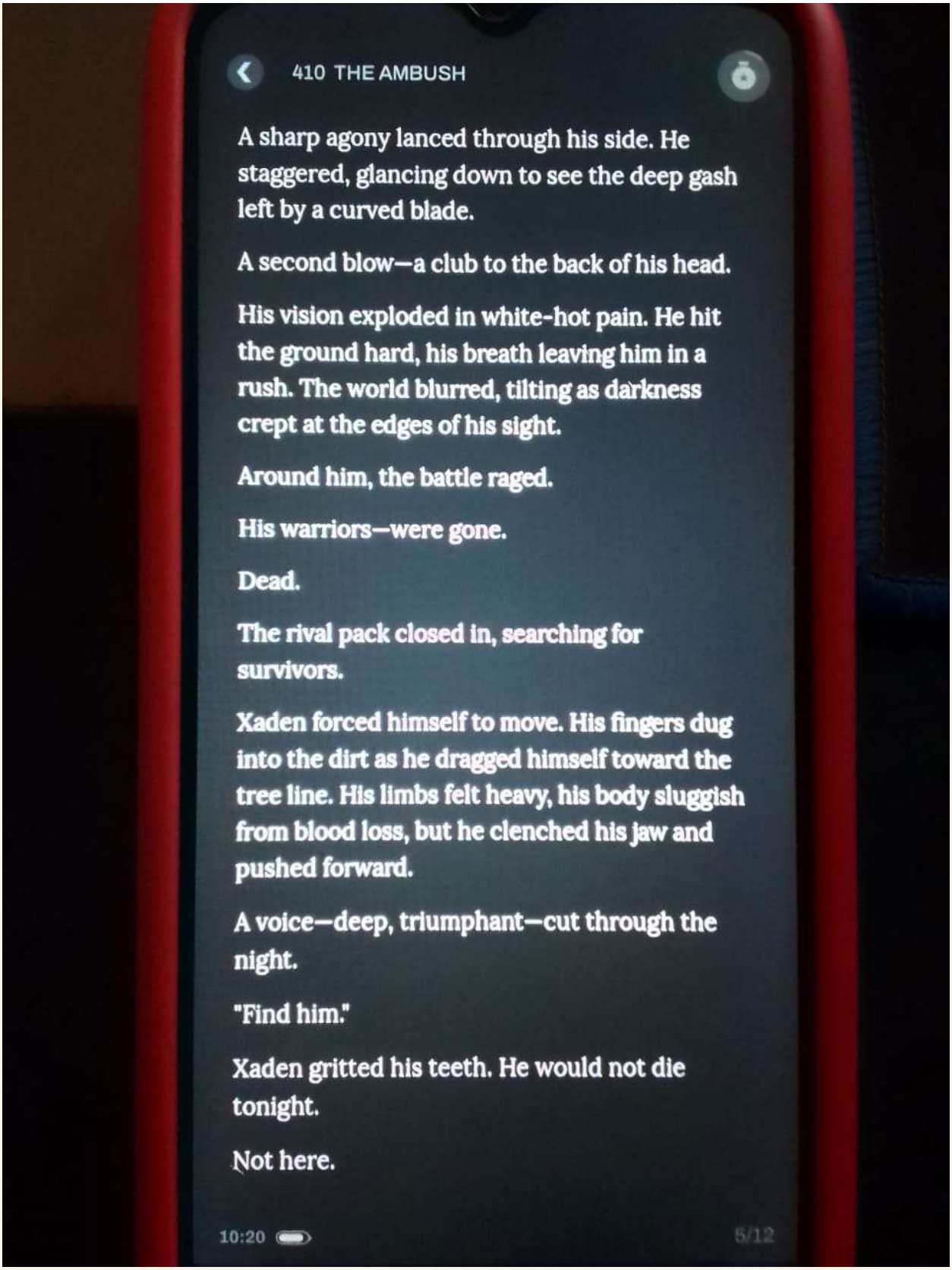
They were falling.

One by one, cut down by overwhelming numbers. The night rang with the clash of steel, the screams of dying men.

Caleb fought like a demon, his axe carving through enemies with brutal efficiency. Another warrior, barely twenty, was skewered from behind.

Xaden's heart pounded as he saw them dying around him. His men. His pack.

Then, pain.


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A sharp agony lanced through his side. He staggered, glancing down to see the deep gash left by a curved blade.
A second blow—a club to the back of his head.
His vision exploded in white-hot pain. He hit the ground hard, his breath leaving him in a rush. The world blurred, tilting as darkness crept at the edges of his sight.
Around him, the battle raged.
His warriors—were gone.
Dead.
The rival pack closed in, searching for survivors.
Xaden forced himself to move. His fingers dug into the dirt as he dragged himself toward the tree line. His limbs felt heavy, his body sluggish from blood loss, but he clenched his jaw and pushed forward.
A voice—deep, triumphant—cut through the night.
"Find him."
Xaden gritted his teeth. He would not die tonight.
Not here.
10:20
5/12

Not like this.

He staggered into the trees, biting back a groan as pain lanced through his ribs. He had to keep going. If they found him, he was dead.

The forest was his only salvation.

Branches whipped against his skin as he stumbled forward, his breath ragged. The enemy's voices faded, but he didn't stop. He couldn't.

Blood dripped from his wounds, soaking his tunic, staining the ground behind him. He pressed a shaking hand to his side, feeling the sticky warmth seeping through his fingers.

His men were dead. His mission had failed.

But he was still alive.

And as long as he lived, he would return.

To his pack.

To Jasmine.

To the child he never thought he'd have.

Xaden pushed forward into the darkness.

This wasn't the end.

Not yet.

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The rain came in heavy sheets, hammering against the wooden walls of the hut. Thunder rumbled across the sky, shaking the ground beneath Jasmine's feet as she paced the length of her chamber. 1

Her hands rested on the small curve of her belly, her heart pounding. Something was wrong.

She could feel it.

A sense of unease had been gnawing at her since sunset, growing stronger with every passing hour. Now, as the storm raged outside, it twisted into something unbearable.

"Jasmine, please," came the gentle voice of Nanny said "You must rest. It isn't good for the baby."

Jasmine turned, her dark eyes glistening in the dim candlelight. "I can't," she whispered. "He's in trouble. I know it."

Nanny sighed, wrapping a warm shawl around her shoulders. "You are exhausted. The mind plays tricks when the body is weary."

Jasmine shook her head. "No. It's different this time."
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She pressed a hand to her heart, as if trying to steady its wild rhythm. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw flashes of something terrible —Xaden, bloodied, alone, his golden eyes dim with pain.

She didn't know how, but she knew.

Something had happened.

Lightning flashed outside, casting long shadows across the room. Jasmine clenched her fists.

"I should have gone with him," she muttered.

Nanny's eyes widened. "Don't say such things. The Alpha would have never allowed it."

"I know."

She wrapped her arms around herself, as if trying to hold in the ache that had settled deep in her bones. The baby shifted inside her, a small flutter of life, and her resolve hardened.

Xaden was alive.

He had to be.

And if he wasn't...

She refused to think of that.

Instead, she whispered a prayer to the gods,

begging them to bring him back. 1

She would not sleep.

Not until he returned to her

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Xaden crouched low behind a fallen tree, pressing a shaking hand against his wound. The night had grown colder, the wind cutting through the trees like a blade. The scent of blood was thick in the air—his own, his men's, and the enemy's.

Torches flickered in the distance, moving through the darkness.

"Find him!" a voice snarled.

The rival warriors were close. He could hear the crunch of their boots against the damp earth, the rustling of leaves as they searched the area.

Xaden held his breath. He couldn't fight them now. Not like this.

He waited, muscles coiled, as two warriors passed dangerously close.

"Are you sure he's still alive?" one of them muttered. "We left him bleeding in the dirt."

"He's alive," the other snapped. "And if we don't
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bring back his head, the Alpha will have ours."

Xaden's jaw tightened. They wanted his head?

They'd have to try harder than that.

The moment they moved on, he forced himself to his feet and ran.

Pain screamed through his side, his vision blurring. He staggered forward, his breath coming in ragged gasps. The rain started as a soft drizzle, then quickly turned into a downpour, soaking his clothes, making the ground slick beneath his boots.

Thunder rumbled in the distance.

He pushed forward, his legs burning with exhaustion. The enemy's voices grew fainter, but he knew they wouldn't give up. They were wolves, like him. They would track his scent.

The rain would help mask it, but it also made running nearly impossible.

His foot slipped on the wet ground, and he crashed to his knees. A sharp cry escaped him as his wounded side slammed against the cold earth. He clenched his teeth, forcing himself back up.

He needed shelter.

Somewhere to hide, to tend his wounds before he collapsed completely.

His vision swam, and the world tilted. He stumbled forward blindly, barely able to see through the sheets of rain. Then, through the darkness, he spotted it—

A cave.

It was small, barely more than a jagged opening in the rock, but it was enough.

Gritting his teeth, he forced himself inside, dragging his aching body across the rough stone. He collapsed against the wall, chest heaving, blood dripping onto the dirt floor. 6

Safe.

For now.

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