

King Breeder 71

Chapter 71 New Home In Papeno

**Rosalie's POV

A little foot kicked me right in the rib cage as I finished slipping my shoes on in the morning.

“Oof,” I mumbled as I sat down on the edge of my bed to catch my breath.

“Are you all right?” Seraphine asked, an amused expression on her face. She was tidying the room, even though that wasn't her responsibility.

“Yes, I'm fine,” I told her, laughing as I rubbed my belly. “This one sure knows how to find Mama's ribs, though.”

I sat there for a few minutes, feeling the baby kick, thanking the Moon Goddess that I was so blessed to have this wonderful child growing inside of me.

For a moment, I let my mind wander to Ethan. It was something I tried not to do. I tried not to think of him at all, if I could help it.

I could imagine him sitting next to me on the bed, his enormous, muscular hand engulfing my abdomen as he waited for the baby to kick his palm.

Would he smile? Would he laugh along with me at each little jab of the baby's foot?

I wasn't sure if Ethan would be like other fathers and marvel at the growth and milestones of his baby along the way, or if he would just look at the child as his heir and otherwise ignore this precious bundle of joy I was growing inside of me, even after I'd given birth.

It didn't matter now. I would never know...

“Are you okay?” Seraphine asked, breaking me out of my trance.

“Yeah, I'm fine.” I smiled at her and then added, “Just thinking about the baby.”

“Ro, what are you going to do about Mr. Soren's offer?” Seraphine asked me as I got ready to go downstairs and get some fresh air.

It had been in my mind for the past few days. I hadn't made a decision yet.

With Derek on this island, I had decided to leave as soon as I could, but where would I be able to go without money? Especially when I was pregnant.

“Seraphine,” I told her, “I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that. Do you think I should take it?”

“I do, dear,” she said with a nod. “It’s a good job for you to take, especially with the baby. You could raise your child and care for his home... Also, I am from Papeno too, remember?”

I nodded. I did remember that, and it was an important factor.

“It’s just... I don’t know him that well.”

“He seems like a good man. He takes care of his people.” She put her hand on my arm. “If I were you, I would take the job.”

He had been kind to me, and I agreed with what Seraphine was saying. “But I’m also worried that I can’t do the

job right.”

“Have you done housework before?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know how to cook?”

“Yes.”

“Have you taken care of other people before?”

“Yes...”

“Then I don’t see a problem.”

Seraphine was right. There seemed to be no reason for me to turn down Soren’s offer. I should give it a try.

But before that I needed to confirm something.

I sat down for dinner across from Soren, wearing a simple green dress.

“Well, you look lovely as usual,” he said, but I could tell he was tired. He had been away from the house all day, and I had heard from Lola that he was busy with lots of meetings.

“Thank you,” I said. “Have you been working all day?”

“You don’t want to hear about that,” he said, waving a hand at me.

Lola brought our food in and set it down in front of us, and I tried my best to act as usual.

“Wow,” Soren said. “I can’t remember the last time I had linguini with clam sauce. This is one of my favorite dishes, but the chef doesn’t like to make it.”

I couldn’t think of anything to say in response to that, so I took a bite, hiding my smile behind my fork.

“Mmm!” Soren said around a full bite. “This is the stuff.” He wasn’t even done chewing when he started talking again. “I love it! Really, I need to get the chef out here and tell him how great it is!”

“Well, the chef already knew that,” Lola said, a twinkle in her eye as she filled Soren’s wine glass. She looked at me and giggled.

I couldn’t help but smile. “What is it?” Soren asked, looking from the maid to me. “What are you two laughing at? You didn’t just poison me, did you?” he asked in a silly voice, which let me know he was joking and trusted me. It just made us laugh more,

“No, no,” I said, “This is a test dinner,” I declared.

*Test?” he asked, wide eyed as he continued to look from Lola to me. “What are we testing? Me?”

I shook my head with a smile. “Well, you’ve passed my test. Now that you seem to like my cooking, I’ve decided to take the job!”

“What?” Soren’s fork clattered against his plate as it fell out of his hand. “At my house? You’ll watch over it for

me?”

“That’s right,” I nodded. “If you would still like me to do inai.

“Hey, hey!” he said, still smiling. “I thought I was the one who was hiring! How did I end up being interviewed? But I like it!” His eyes were bright. “Yes, yes! Of course, I would. This is great. I’m so excited, I could kiss you!”

I felt my face heat up as my eyes widened.

“I could– but I won’t!” he amended hastily. “I know you, Ro. We’ll go there, and I’ll show you around. You’ll love

it.”

“I can’t wait,” I said with all my heart. “Thank you for the opportunity, Mr. Soren!”

Me pretending to be formal made him laugh even louder.

“Don’t worry, Ro. You’ll love it there, and so will your child. It’s a great place. Besides, you trust me, don’t you?”

I looked across the table and met his eyes, those familiar eyes that were the same as Ethan’s, yet so very different from the ones I was so used to looking into.

“Yes, I trust you,” I found myself saying.

He reached across the table and found my hand, patting it.

“I’m so happy you’ll be staying with us, Ro. I know we haven’t known each other that long, but you’re like a breath of fresh air. I’m so glad to have met you.”

He pulled his hand away, and a strange moment passed between us before he said, “Now, back to this delicious dinner!”

I smiled and picked up my *fork*. He was so sweet, and I knew he was talking about the fact that *we* were getting along so well—as friends.

There was nothing more between us, and that was great, because I was absolutely certain I wasn’t ready for anything else.

I might never be ready for anything else.

I had my baby, and that was all that mattered.

“Ready to check it out?”

Two days later, after a three-hour boat ride, we arrived at the private deck of his estate on Pepano.

The property was much bigger than the one I’d been staying at, and it took a while for him to give me a grand tour of the entire estate. I couldn’t believe how opulent everything was. Standing outside and looking up at the mansion, I was impressed.

Soren was richer than I had thought. I supposed it was because he didn’t act like most rich people I knew. He was too.. kind.

“Where will I be staying while I’m here?” I asked him after I’d seen the last of the rooms. I’d seen plenty of bedrooms, but he hadn’t told me which one would be mine

Rather than answering me, he smiled and nodded his head, gesturing for me to follow him.

As we headed outside, the fading sun beamed down upon me, and I took in the sights around. I had seen glimpses of the garden from the windows in some of the rooms, but seeing it firsthand took my breath away.

“This is beautiful,” I whispered in amazement. He chuckled.

“Oh, this is nothing. Just wait.”

I wasn't quite sure where he was leading me, but there was an air of excitement to this place.

At the end of a cobblestone pathway, a small white cottage with a wrap-around porch came into view. Green vines hung from the roof and wrapped around the porch posts. Flowers adorned every corner, and a bright blue front door greeted me warmly.

It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. It seemed like it had been picked out of a fairytale story, and placed directly in front of me.

“Oh, wow...”

“It's beautiful isn't it?” Soren muttered as if taking in the breathtaking sight for the first time, just like I was.

“It is. But who lives here?” I wasn't sure why Soren would want to show me someone else's home, but I was pleased to see it, regardless.

“You do.”

Those two words froze me in my place.

“Excuse me?” I asked softly, turning to him, speechless.

“This cottage is for you, if you would like it,” Soren explained with a smile. “It's still very close to the main house, but I figured you would like your privacy. It's a good place for you to stay while you're watching over the main house.”

Speechless was not a good enough word to describe me at that moment.

“This is too much. I couldn't possibly accept it.”

“Umso do you want to stay in the same house as me again then?” Soren teased me.

I blushed and couldn't find the right words to respond. “No, not that!”

He let out a laugh, seemingly amused by my reaction. “Ro, you work here and you need a place to stay for your work, remember? It’s empty anyway. If you like it, let’s get some use out of it! It won’t be ready completely for two days, but then it will be open for you to stay in. Also, all the rooms have furniture but one. I figured you would want to do the nursery yourself.”

Tears filled my eyes as I looked back at the house and thought over everything I had been through.

I didn’t understand why Soren was being so nice to me when we hadn’t known each other for that long. No one had ever been this kind to me.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you,” Soren said quickly, pulling out a white handkerchief and handing it to me.

I couldn’t help but laugh, shaking my head. A peaceful silence fell between us, and I tried to let my mind process everything that had happened today.

“You didn’t upset me,” I told him. “You just might be the nicest person I’ve ever met.”

Chapter 72 Ethan Found Out About Papeno

**Ethan’s POV

“We’ll need to figure out which of the Denali Islands may be used by our enemies.” | met with James and Talon in private.

“Ethan, how are you going to do this? Romero may be cunning, but he is not stupid,” James asked.

I turned to the King with a smirk, “Your Majesty, didn’t you want me to marry Madalynn? I will, in one month.”

James stroked his chin as if he was trying to understand my true intentions. “Very well, I’ll have the announcement out this afternoon.”

I knew my decision probably didn’t make Talon super excited, but he didn’t say much in front of the king.

“Ethan, why—” Talon chased me out of the meeting room.

I turned to face Talon, and my words were cold. “Because I need Madalynn to come to me.”

He paused for a moment, and I gave him my command. “Tell the guys to get ready for some action.”

Madalynn's voice rang from the other side of the door. "Ethan!"

I walked over to open the door.

She was wearing subtle make-up, her perfume wasn't as strong as usual, and she acted more polite than usual. Madalynn may be arrogant, but like her father, she wasn't stupid by any means. She knew how to carry herself in front of different people.

But I still needed to fight against my urge to frown.

"Is it true?" Her eyes were filled with excitement.

I acknowledged it with a nod. "It's the king's order."

It was obvious I had made her day by allowing her into my suite.

"You've agreed that we are getting married in a month?" She tried to get reassurance from me.

I looked at her. "Is the reason why you're here today to question me?"

Although I didn't answer her directly, it was enough for her. She smiled and asked, "May I come in?"

I walked back to the living room and sat on the couch.

She hesitated and followed me to the couch. Seeing I had no objection, she took the seat only one spot away from me.

"So do you need me for anything?" I wanted to get this over with soon, but I knew I needed to be patient.

She cleared her throat. "Oh, ahem, yes." She collected her thoughts. "Now that we are getting married, figured we have a few things to discuss."

"Go ahead."

"I'd like to take a photo for the announcement for the paper." She glanced at me to check my reaction. "Maybe we can talk about it over lunch?"

It took every ounce of me to entertain this conversation, but I tried my best to even my tone. "When?"

She seemed a little surprised, but her eyes lit up.

"How about today?" It was almost noon.

I nodded, put on my suit jacket, and walked over to the door.

She seemed to be still in a daze. When she finally realized that I was waiting for her, she moved quicker than I had ever seen her move, and before I knew it, we were walking down the main hall towards the small dining room on castle property.

As we walked towards the restaurant, I saw people look at us curiously.

“Ethan?” She had a victorious smile on her face. “I am glad that we are finally doing something together.” I didn’t respond, but it didn’t change her good mood.

“Just the two of you today?” a young woman asked when we approached.

“Yes. We are celebrating today,” Madalynn answered before I could, and I raised a brow in question as to what she meant by celebrating.

“Oh, that’s wonderful. Right this way please, Alpha... Luna.”

I was displeased with how Madalynn was addressed, but I kept my mouth shut. My silence, however, could not be more satisfying for Madalynn.

As we sat at the table, Madalynn ordered wine with a smile on her face. Then she switched her focus to me, seemingly expecting us to have a conversation.

“Ethan, thank you for coming here with me.” If I hadn’t seen some of her behaviors before, I would even consider her tone graceful.

“Welcome,” was all I could say.

I didn’t consider myself to be polite exactly, but she didn’t seem to mind.

After a few seconds of silence, I started the conversation. “You wanted to talk about the photo taking?”

She stared at me again for a second and then answered my question. “Yes, I wanted to ask you when would be a good time and good location.”

I tried to sound as patient as I could. “Time, up to you, as long as there is no emergency. As for location assume you like islands?”

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Madalynn relaxed a bit more. “Yes, I do like islands. That’s where I’m from.”

“Tell me about them.”

She seemed to be happy with the conversation, especially with others looking our way. “What do you want to know about them?”

“Places you would recommend to visit?”

“Um...some islands are best for private parties, some have good food. I don't like trade ports; they are too busy

for my taste.” She placed a small piece of steak in her mouth. “Too many people. I don't like noise. I'd rather stay on my own islands.”

“You have your own private islands?”

“Of course, I do!”

“I assume those islands are quiet because they won't allow large ships?” If so, I had no interest in knowing them because that meant they held little military value.

“You are right. My islands are all like that.”

I chuckled.

She was curious. “What are you laughing at?”

I thought for a few seconds. “You're the only heir. All of your father's private islands would be yours. So are those bigger and more noisy ones. Seems like you would have quite a lot of responsibilities in your future. Remind me how many public and private port cities are there in total?”

She appeared to be flattered by my comments, but the look on her face was quite ambitious. “There are six, four public and two private.”

“Interesting, I could name the four public ones. Never been to private ports.”

I looked at her, waiting for her to say something.

“You want to go to the private ports?” She looked pleasantly surprised that I would imply such a request.

I encouraged her. “Maybe.”

Madalynn wasn't too enthusiastic about visiting the private ports. She shrugged. “If you want, of course, I would show you around. But as far as I know, nothing interesting comes from Papeno. I found it quite boring when I was there last year. It's more like a storage fortress....”

‘Papeno,’ I mindlinked Talon.

‘Got it, Alpha. I will send scouts.’

Now that I’d gotten the information I needed, the rest of the lunch seemed to drag forever.

“But Ethan, why did you all of sudden become so interested in the islands?” Madalynn asked out of the blue.

Did she realize I was fishing for information from her? Did she suspect me?

My gaze grew colder. “Shall I not?”

She was taken aback. “E... Ethan?”

| softened my tone. “I thought we were getting married, and you’d be happy that I care?”

“Ye—yes, of course! Ethan, I am happy, so happy!” She stood up and wrapped her arms around mine. “I’m just feeling this isn’t real.”

My muscles cringed at her touch, and I tried my best to not pull my arm away from her.

Madalynn sighed for a moment as if thinking over something, and looked up to me again with a smile. “You know, *we* are engaged, but I don’t have anything of yours to symbolize that I belong to you. That just makes me feel so insecure.”

I frowned again. What did this woman want?

“Like a token, something that I can keep with me at all times.” She looked up at me. “Something that shows I’m yours and you’re mine....”

There was a glint in her eye as she spoke, setting my nerves on edge.

Then she reached out to my hand and caressed the black and gold ring sitting on my right ring finger. It had the symbol of my bloodline, and I never took it off.

Then I heard her say, “Ethan, it would make me feel much better if I could have this ring...”

As she was leaning her head on my chest, I took off the ring and threw it to her. I couldn’t stand her presence any longer.

The victorious smile on her face disgusted me, and I left the room as soon as I could.

Chapter 73 Buy, Buy Baby

**Rosalie’s POV

“It seems like you’re starting to get settled here in the cottage,” Soren said a few days after I’d accepted the position and moved into the little house beside the garden.

I’d just let him in and was trying to plan my day. I’d thought about doing a bit of decorating. The cottage looked nice, but I thought it could use some of my own personal touches. “I love it here,” I told him. “I can’t tell you how much I appreciate this.”

Soren waved his hand at me and stepped into the living room. “It’s nothing, Ro. I’m just glad that you are going to be here to watch over my home while I’m away. Is everything to your liking? If not, **we can always get new** furniture.” He ran his hand along a table near the back of the sofa.

“Everything is great,” I assured him. Some of the furniture was a little worn, but it was perfect for me. I didn’t mind.

“Well, then, Ro, if all of the other rooms are adequate. Perhaps we could go look at furniture for the baby’s room? Would you like to take a little trip? See what we can find?”

My face lit up. “That would be amazing! But I still don’t know if I’m having a boy or a girl. I guess it doesn’t matter for basic furniture.”

He shrugged. “If you go with white or basic wooden furniture, the gender shouldn’t matter. You can wait for all of the finishing touches later, I suppose.”

“I would love that. Thank you so much!”

With a grin, Soren reached out and patted my arm. “Go get ready to go, and I’ll wait here.”

I went to get ready, putting on a nicer outfit, one that Soren had his own maids pick out for me recently. When I moved in, my closets had been full of cute maternity clothes in my size and the larger sizes I would need. I put on a pair of red leggings and a white flowing top with red polka dots and my makeup, putting my hair in a ponytail before I headed out to join Soren.

“Wow!” he said, putting his cell phone in his pocket the moment he saw me, making me feel more important than whomever he’d been talking to something Ethan would never do. “You look amazing. You’re **always** beautiful, but that outfit is great.”

“Thanks,” I said, “It’s one that your people bought me.”

“My people have good taste,” he said. “Shall we?” He offered me his arm like we were going to a formal ball.

I took his arm, and we headed out the door into a lovely day where the sun was shining down on us brightly, and the birds were singing. The **weather was always nice here.**

“Now, there’s something I need to tell you,” Soren said, as we walked along past the bright flowers in the garden. Their floral aromas swirled around us and added to the enchantment of this day.

“What’s that?” I asked him, not bothered **by whatever it was he was** about to reveal.

“There’s no baby furniture store on this island,” he said.

I felt a tinge of disappointment inside, but I figured he had to have a solution, or else *we* wouldn’t still be walking. “Okay…,”

“We will have to go to another, nearby island, and they’ll ship your purchases over. I’ll handle all of that, no problem.”

“All right!”

“Don’t you want to know how we’re getting there?” he asked as we reached the garden **gates**.

“Won’t we just take a boat?” I asked him.

But as we exited the garden and I saw the yard around Soren’s mansion, I realized **there was** something at the dock in the distance I’d never seen there before.

I’d heard it a few times but never really thought about it before.

“Nah,” he said with a grin. “I thought we’d take a different ride of mine—if you’re not too nervous.”

“I’m not too nervous,” I said, but I wasn’t sure that was true. My face might’ve gone a little pale at the sight. Still, I trusted him, and I was up for an adventure.

I was up for a ride in a seaplane.

I buckled my seatbelt tight, but I was still nervous when the seaplane took off. It was loud, I couldn’t hear much. I had a headset on, and I was so glad that Soren was right next to me.

“It’s fine,” he told me, leaning over to me. His voice was clear and deep in my ear, causing goosebumps all over my body. “I fly in the seaplane all the time.”

I couldn’t help but grab his arm.

“I know,” I said, looking out the window to hide my pinkening cheeks. I was more worried about my baby than myself. I couldn’t help but think, if we crashed, something would happen to my child. But I knew that was silly. We would be fine.

I squeezed Soren's arm as the seaplane lifted off of the ground, but once we were in the air, and the island **beneath us was getting** smaller and smaller, the view was spectacular. I clapped for him, and that made Soren laugh.

"I want to show you something really special. Look over there," he said, leaning over and pointing out my window. He was so close to me, it was hard to focus on the scene out the window and not him. "Do you **see the** waterfall?" He touched me gently on the arm, just a soft, soothing touch.

"I do!" I said, watching the stream of crystal blue **water cascading** down from the lush green at the top of the mountain. Everywhere I looked, I saw the beauty of the islands. I hadn't gotten **to see much** of my surroundings since I'd been injured so quickly after my arrival, but it was beautiful here.

Like paradise.

"Oh!" Soren gasped, pointing out to the ocean. "Look out there!"

I turned my attention to the water just in time **to see several gray dolphins** leaping out of the water and diving back in. "That's incredible!"

I turned my head to look at him, and he was so close to my face, my lips almost grazed his cheek.

A rush of heat filled my face as I turned back to look out the window, ignoring the spicy masculine smell of his cologne as well. I couldn't tell why, but Soren acted a little differently today.

The seaplane ride didn't take long, and in a matter of minutes, we were landing again. Soren scooted back into his own seat once we began to descend, and when we touched down on the water, he gently squeezed my hand. I felt a little awkward.

But we were friends, and this was just how Soren was. I told myself to stop overreacting and focus on the new **experiences**.

"Let's go," Soren said, hopping out of the seaplane first. He offered his hand, and I climbed out. I hesitated but avoided his hand-I grabbed his arm to steady myself instead. There was a car waiting for us that took us the short distance to the baby furniture **store**.

I walked in and was almost overwhelmed with all of the adorable baby decor I was greeted with.

I wanted to touch and see everything! Soren laughed at me as I covered my face with my hands.

"It's a great little store, isn't it?" he asked, guiding me in with one hand on the small of my back.

“It is.” I agreed. It was a mom and pop store, so it wasn’t that big, but it had a lot in it. Everywhere I looked, the next item was cuter than the last.

“Look at this,” he said, picking up a baby bonnet. He put it on his head, even though it was way too small for him

—and pink.

Laughter rolled out of my mouth. “You’re an awfully big baby,” I told him.

Looking injured, he took the hat off and put it down, “Well, that wasn’t very nice.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I said and then in a baby voice, I asked, “Did I huwt yow feewings?” and then we both laughed together until we could hardly stand up.

“Can I help you?” an older woman asked, coming over to meet us. She looked amused at our antics, not annoyed, and when we could finally speak again, I decided to let Soren be the one to tell her what we were there **for**.

“Hello, Mrs. Dover,” he said, still chuckling a bit. “How are you today?”

“Oh, Mr. Soren!” she said, bowing her head. “Forgive me. I didn’t recognize you.. under the circumstances.”

“No, no, it’s quite alright,” he said, waving her off nonchalantly. “This is Miss Ro. I believe my assistant, Thomas, called you to let you know we’d be in to look for some nursery furniture?”

“Yes, I spoke to him a little while ago,” Mrs. Dover said with a bright smile. She had white hair and glasses and looked like a sweet grandmotherly figure. “Miss Ro, do you have any idea what sort of furniture you might want *for* your nursery?”

I stared at her for a moment because I hadn’t really given it too much thought. When I’d lived in the capital, I knew all of those decisions would be made without my input. “No, ma’am,” I said. “Not really.”

“Ma’am?” she questioned. “My goodness, you’re polite! You don’t need to be so formal, sweetie. Well, come along, and let’s take a look at what we have, and you can let me know which ones you like the best, and we can narrow it down from there.”

For the next hour or so, *we* walked around the little shop and looked at all of the options. I **looked at several** different beds, but when I finally saw *one* that was in the back of the store, a cherry wood crib with a beautiful finish that caught the light and seemed to glow, I thought, “That’s the one.”

“Can we look at that one?” I asked Mrs. Dover.

“Oh, yes,” she said. “That one is the Leonardo model. We don’t sell a lot of those because they are so expensive, but it’s wonderful.”

“Let’s look at it,” Soren said, his hands in his pockets as if they had no bottoms.

Mrs. Dover smiled and led us over. “As you can see, it’s very sturdy. The slats are close together, so the baby will always be safe, and it converts into a toddler bed.”

She went on to tell us several other pieces of information about the bed and the rest of the matching furniture, but I didn’t really need to hear any of it, I knew that this was the one that I wanted.

Sometimes, when you see the right one, you just know. However, I decided to walk away from it. Just because I liked it, didn’t mean I could afford it.

“What do you think?” Soren asked.

I shook my head. “Soren, let’s take a look at others.”

“You don’t like it? Why? Is it the color?”

I shook my head. “No, I do like it, just—”

“We’ll take it,” Soren said, interrupting my words. I stared at him for a moment, thinking maybe we needed to talk about it. “What?” he asked, staring right back.

“Soren, it’s too expensive,” I told him. “I don’t think I can afford it.”

“What? Oh, don’t worry, I’ll pay for it.”

I grabbed his arm, “No, Soren, I’m not sure if I can ever pay you back.”

He tipped his head to the side and lifted his hand to touch my face. “Ro,” he said, “I thought we passed that. Don’t worry about it. I want to do this for you. Besides... I’ve thought about that, and I have an idea of one of the ways that you can pay me back for everything.”

“Huh?” I asked him, but before he could respond to me, Mrs. Dover was talking to him again, and Soren was talking to her again.

I had no idea what he was talking about as far as me paying him back, but it **made me nervous**.

Soren had offered me a good job, and that’s why I was here. However, even with that, it could be years before I could pay back what he had spent on me.

Would someone really do that for just a friend?

Knowing how kind Soren was, he probably would, right?

“Are you ready, Ro?” Soren asked, offering me his hand.

Thadn’t realized that the entire transaction was over. I never saw him pay anything, but then, maybe Thomas had already arranged for all of that, or maybe he would.

“Oh, yeah, I’m ready,” I said, trying to snap out of my head. I’d enjoyed my day so far, and I didn’t want to have it ruined because I was concerned with how I was going to repay Soren.

We left the store and made our way back to the **waterway** where the seaplane was waiting for us. I’m sorry we

couldn’t eat lunch together,” Soren said. “But I do have another meeting this afternoon I need to get to.”

“That’s okay,” I told him before we climbed in, and I braced myself for the seaplane to lift off again. This time, when Soren held on to me, I all of a sudden wasn’t that sure.

I wanted to make sure he wasn’t trying to buy me.

We landed and he walked me back to my cottage. “Ro, is everything okay?” he asked, walking next to me. “I feel like something’s wrong. Did I do something?”

“Everything is fine,” I told him. “I think I just wore myself out.”

“Oh, that’s too bad,” he said. “Because I was hoping that when we got back to your place, you could start paying me back for all of the stuff I’ve given you.” He had a twinkle in his eye and a mischievous smile on his face.

I felt my stomach tighten up, wondering what he was getting at.

Maybe I didn’t want to know.

Chapter 74: Did He Even Miss Me?

“Paying you back?” I said as Soren and I walked along the path to my cottage. I had only started my work **a few days ago**, and I didn’t have enough savings yet.

But he wanted me to pay him back? And he was leading me home.

I felt panicked. What if he wanted me to do something I wasn’t ready for?

Rosalie, stop thinking like that! I scolded myself.

Soren wasn’t that kind of person, I should have known by now!

He had a crooked grin on his face, and even though I had never had a reason before not to trust him, all of the thoughts before that I'd kept in the back of my mind about how odd it was that he was being so nice to me, resurfaced.

Who would do all of this without expecting something in return?

No one.

So.. did he want something from me after all?

No, no, I kept shaking my head. He wouldn't. I must have thought it wrong, but what if...

I felt like I was about to cry. What should I do? I regretted so much that I didn't insist on not buying that **expensive** furniture.

"Come on, Ro," he said, reaching over and tugging on my hand. "Come into the cottage. I have something I want you to see. I think you're going to like it." He made that last statement in a sing-song voice.

Cold chills ran down my spine. "I think I might not," I thought to myself. To him, I said, "I am pregnant, you know?"

"I know," he said, his eyebrows furrowed. We paused in the foyer. "What difference does that make?"

"A lot," I told him. I knew I was just making excuses when I should've been honest. "It wouldn't be... comfortable."

"Well, you can always just scoot back."

"Only so far," I reminded him.

He shrugged. "Your tummy's not that big, and your legs are pretty long. It'll be fine."

I couldn't figure out what my legs had to do with anything, so I just stared at him for a moment.

"I wasn't sure if it would fit. It's pretty big. And the opening's kinda small."

My eyes bulged, "How do you know that?"

"Well, I measured," he said leaning against the door jamb to the living room. "The rear entry was even tighter than the front. But it squeezed in, steps and all."

"Steps? Wait—what?" I realized then I was missing something.

"If you don't like it, I can have it taken back out, but what do you think?"

When he finally moved aside, that's when I saw it.

A baby grand piano.

It was sitting in the corner of the living room. One of the small **sofas was gone**, and a chair was moved over, but it fit.

And it was gorgeous. The black polished surface gleamed in the sunlight coming in the front windows. I **covered** my mouth at the sight of its stunning beauty.

"Do you like it?" Soren asked me.

.

"Soren," I couldn't take my eyes off it, "I love it! It's the most beautiful piano I've ever seen!" That might not have been completely true. I remembered that white piano back at the Drogomor pack. But this one? This one **was in** my cottage. It was mine.

Or was it?

I paused a few steps into the room, turning to look at him and remembering the conversation we'd just had and what I'd thought he was getting at.

"Soren, I can't accept this, though," I told him.

"What?" his forehead crinkled. "Why not?" He looked like he was a child, and I'd just ripped his ice cream cone from his hands and dumped it on the ground.

"Because it's too expensive!" I replied. "This had to cost a fortune!" My fingers longed to brush over the smooth ebony surface of the lid, which was open, ready for me to sit on the bench and play. I wanted to run my fingers over the keys and hear the melody come to life and fill the cottage with beautiful music.

"It doesn't matter what it costs, Ro. I brought it here so that you can start paying me back. I told you, this is how you're going to pay me back, remember?"

"I am confused," I admitted. "How is buying me another gift helping me pay you back?"

"You said you are a singer, and you play piano, remember?" he said, grinning at me but still looking **exasperated**. "I want to hear it. I imagine you have a beautiful voice. If you'll sing for me, then you can start paying me back. My own private concerts from an angel."

I stared at him in disbelief. "That's how I will pay you back? By singing?" It didn't seem like a real request. It wasn't like I was a famous singer. I was just an ordinary girl who liked to sing. Why would my songs be worth paying for?

“Yes!” he said, shaking his head like I was the child now, one that didn’t listen very well. “You sing, I’ll listen, and that’ll help repay your debts.” He had that twinkle in his eyes again.

“I don’t think that’s much of a repayment,” I admitted to him. “I love to sing—and I love playing the piano. I’ve been itching to play again for a while now. It’s just more of a reward for me.”

His shoulders shot up for a moment before he dropped them again. “Not every business transaction has to be painful, Ro. I’m glad you like to play. I may join you sometimes, but I’d rather sit in that comfy chair and listen to you, my eyes shut, a nice drink in my hand, my mind floating far, far away.”

I smiled at him, looking all relaxed already. It was different to be around a man who knew how to let things go and separate work from the rest of his life.

“Come on, Ro. Accept the gift—or another job offer. If you feel that bad about it, you don’t necessarily have to

take it with you when you leave here, although you’re welcome to. For now, I’m gonna pour myself a scotch and you a nice ice water—and sit in that chair and listen to you tell me if the tuners did a good job or not.”

“I thought you had a meeting,” I reminded him.

He looked at his watch. “I’ve got twenty minutes. Sooth my soul, Ro.” He reached up and tweaked my chin with his thumb and first finger, and I felt a pulse of electricity shoot down my spine.

I told myself I was just giddy over getting to play the piano again. Clapping my hands together in excitement, I went to the bench as he went to fix the drinks. I’d have to make sure no one ever sat anything wet or cold on the piano, coaster or not! I didn’t want the finish ruined.

I sat down and readied my fingers, trying to decide what to play. I ran through a few scales and found the tuning to be excellent. Then, as Soren sat my water on a side table nearby, I chose a sonnet I hadn’t played in many years and let my fingers run through it as my mind drifted off.

I didn’t want to play anything I’d ever played for Ethan before, not right away anyway, not if I could help it.

As my fingers ran over the keys, and I began to sing a song I knew by heart, I thought about the other men in my life and how they were so different from Soren. I was so silly to think he was propositioning me earlier. I glanced over to see him sitting there, eyes closed, drink in his hand, a smile on his face.

My father, my brother even Ethan. None of them had been kind to me. None of them would’ve ever given me a gift like this or been thoughtful or considerate just because they wanted me to be happy.

Granted, Ethan did give me the necklace I was wearing, but only because Georgia had given me the train.

Did he even miss me? Was he with Madalynn now? Did he even think about me at all?

He probably missed the baby, but he would just find someone else to carry his child.

All I ever was to him was a breeder, someone to produce his heir....

But to Soren—He didn't want anything from me... He never asked anything from me. **He seemed to see me as a human—as a friend.**

My fingers traced the keys for several more minutes. I switched songs a few times before his watch beeped, and he reluctantly opened his eyes.

When he looked at me, there were some emotions in his eyes I couldn't quite read. Surprise, peace and desire. However, in a blink of an eye, his branded smile was back, and all the emotions I had glimpsed before seemed to be just my imagination.

He got out of his chair, and I stopped playing, standing to meet him.

"That was so very beautiful. I'm so sorry I have to go," he seemed to be in a bit of a rush which was rare. "But I'll be back—if you don't mind."

"No, of course I don't mind," I told him.

A small sigh escaped his lips as they turned upright at the corners. "Good. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, when I can't sleep, something like that would be just the thing to help me slumber."

"It would be my honor to play for you." I smiled.

Chapter 75: First Night With Soren?

**Soren's POV

Thomas was waiting for me at the end of Rosalie's driveway, my briefcase in his hand.

I didn't say anything, but I knew the look on his face. He was afraid I was going to be late for my meeting back in Avondale, and maybe he was right.

Well, Edgar Maul could wait. We had a deal to work out, but until he could come around to my terms, it wasn't like he was my best pal. I wasn't eager to see him anyway.

"You look relaxed," Thomas noted, falling into step beside me as we walked briskly to the waiting limo.

I shook my head. “Piano,” was all I was willing to say.

“So your plan is working,” he replied, pushing the subject. “She liked it?”

“She loved it.” The driver opened the door, and I slid in, Thomas following me. I remembered Rosalie’s face when she saw the piano across the room. “Worked like a charm.”

Thomas smirked a little, looking away, his eyes focused out the window as the car began to roll.

“What’s that look for?” | glared at him.

“Huh?” Suddenly, he had a hearing problem. That, or he just didn’t want to answer me. “Oh, uh, nothing. I just... you said charmed, and I was just thinking... perhaps... you were a little charmed.”

I stared at him for a long moment. “Perhaps you should be careful what you say to me, Thomas, or you might find yourself flying out the window.”

He straightened his face, but I was only partially joking. It was true that Rosalie was quite pretty and beguiling, but I knew that this was pure business. I had my goals in mind, and I wasn’t going to lose focus on them.

My cell phone rang, so I fished it out of my jacket pocket and noted that it was Damian of all people. I cursed under my breath before answering it.

I didn’t really want to speak to him. “What do you want?” I asked him.

“Just checking in,” he replied. “How did it go?”

“Yeah, well, had you done your job,” I reminded him. “maybe then she wouldn’t have gotten the total sh*t beaten out of her,”

“Just a little sh*t?” he asked. I narrowed my eyes, not that he could see me. “Anyway, what do you want me to do *now*?”

* Just hang tight. She doesn’t leave this island without me and my permission.” No one left this island without my permission. “I’ve got some other things you can handle while you’re here if you think you can handle it. But then, I’ll have to make sure none of them involve pregnant women because clearly they can take you down easily and take your toys.”

“She drugged me!” Damian shouted into my ear.

“I don’t accept excuses, Damian! You failed and put the entire plan into jeopardy. I’ll have Thomas text you

later.” I hung up the phone and put it back in my pocket.

“What am I texting him later?” Thomas asked.

“Do you always eavesdrop?” I muttered, pinching the bridge of my nose.

“We’re sitting less than four feet apart,” he said, his tone calm, as it should be. I had been pretending to be too nice for too long.

“Just an odd job or something. Keep him busy while I figure out what the hell to do with him. Speaking of odd jobs, have you heard from McGinty today?” I had sent the other mercenary on an odd job the day before, and he hadn’t reported yet, to my knowledge.

Thomas nodded. “Yeah, he took out Clark and four of his men. Got the money. We’re good.”

I smiled. I always liked it when reports ended that way, we got the money and we’re good. That was what I liked to hear.

“And we got that shipment through, so that supply chain in the north isn’t going anywhere.”

My smile broadened. Lots of good news today.

The car kept rolling, and I focused on the meeting I had with Edgar Maul. It wasn’t easy being me, but someone had to do it.

**Rosalie’s POV

My fingers continued to fly over the keys, and my voice mingled with the melody, filling the small living room of the cottage with music.

It had only been a couple of hours since Soren had left, but I already missed him, and I couldn’t quite say why.

I just wished he were still in the chair, listening to me play, with that calm, relaxed smile on his face. It made me so happy knowing I could make someone feel that way.

Not often did I feel like someone really appreciated my music, but Soren did.

“Miss Ro?” Lola said, pausing in the entryway. “Please pardon my intrusion, but it’s past two o’clock. You should take a break from your music playing and eat some lunch. Seraphine is here too.”

My fingers stopped tracing the notes, and I looked over at her, standing with her hands behind her and her head tipped slightly down, like I might be upset at her words.

She was right. I did need to eat. The baby needed to eat.

I was hungry anyway, and it wasn't like the piano wouldn't be here later. I pulled myself away from my new gift and followed her into the dining area where she had a small spread of sandwiches and other finger foods set out for me,

Lola and Seraphine knew how I hated eating by myself, so at least one of them always ate with me, even if it was against the rules of high society. Today, three of us sat at the table, and I told them about the trip I'd taken onto the other island. I told them about the seaplane ride, shopping for baby furniture, and how kind Soren had been.

"I couldn't believe he wanted to bring in a piano," Lola noted. "But I'm so glad he did. Miss Ro, you play so beautifully."

"Thank you," I said, "I will be playing for him whenever he likes to repay him for his kindness."

"Well, he certainly seems to like you," Lola said with a twinkle in her eye.

I smiled at her, but I was shaking my head. "It's not like that at all," I told her. "We are just friends."

Lola's eyebrows raised. She took a bite of her sandwich, and I knew she wouldn't question me, but she didn't have to use words to make me feel that she didn't believe what I was saying.

"You have been through a lot," Seraphine said. "We don't have to know the story to know that. You are right to be cautious. But Soren is a good man. You can trust him."

I looked around the table, and both of them were nodding.

They knew him better than I did. I trusted them-and I was beginning to trust him.

Later that night, I was lying in bed, thinking about my baby, trying not to think about Ethan. My hands were sore from playing so much in one day. I had gotten little else done because I'd spent so much time at the piano. The garden was going to be neglected now that the piano had arrived.

My phone buzzed—yes, since I moved to Papeno, he had even given me a phone. He claimed that this was a "work phone." It took me a couple days to get used to it.

I picked it up, noting it was past midnight.

I knew it had to be Soren calling. Who else could it be?

"Are you still awake?" he asked me.

"No," I answered, just being silly.

He sent a laughing emoji. "Are you sleep texting then?"

“Maybe,” I said. “Are you in Avondale?”

“No,” he replied. “I’m at your front door.”

| almost jumped up from the bed. I wasn’t expecting that.

I grabbed my robe, putting it on over my pajamas. I slid my phone into my pocket and shoved my feet into my slippers.

At least I knew what this late-night call was about, and it had nothing to do with the bedroom. I still laughed at myself for what I’d thought he’d meant earlier.

When I reached the door, I pulled it open to find a slightly disheveled Soren standing there with roses in his hand. They *were* pink—for friendship. His tie was undone, and his hair was a little messy, but he was smiling. “Care to sing me a lullaby?”

I laughed. “You brought me flowers, even at midnight?”

He shrugged. “It’s what I do.”

I moved aside so that he could come in, and we walked into the living room. Lola didn’t stay here, so I got my own vase. I also grabbed a blanket and pillow for him, and as Soren made himself comfortable on the couch, I sat down behind the piano and began to play him a lullaby.

Chapter 76 He Has Moved On

**Rosalie’s POV

Soren and I fell into a bit of a routine. He’d come over almost every night, if he was at home and not away on business, and I’d play the piano and sing a lullaby or other soothing song, and most of the time he would return to his mansion, but once in a while, he’d end up falling asleep on my sofa.

When that happened, we’d have breakfast together, and then he’d go off to work or to his business trip, and I’d

go on about my day.

No matter how late it was when he came over, or how busy his day was, he always brought me a gift of some sort. It amazed me that he could be so thoughtful. Books, accessories, chocolates, once even a teddy bear, which I thought I’d save for the baby but ended up putting on my bed—all of those gifts graced my shelves. Usually, though, he brought me flowers, despite the fact that I had an entire garden of them outside of my door.

“What are you planning to do today?” Soren asked one morning over breakfast. He normally asked that over breakfast, but this day ended up differently than I expected.

“I don’t know,” I told him, which was how I normally answered. I had just finished buttering a piece of toast and was preparing to take a bite when he folded the newspaper he’d been glancing over and set it aside, putting it near me. I have been making a blanket for the baby, but I’m almost out of yarn.”

“Oh, do you need to go to the shop in town and get some more?” he asked, taking a sip of his coffee.

“Probably,” I said. “I know you don’t like for me to go into town without you. Are you going to be around today?” **There were a few** shops on the island, but not many. Usually, if we needed something, we had to go to a different island, which I hadn’t done much of. Only the seaplane ride. Other than that, I had only left the cottage a few times.

“I have a really important meeting off the island today,” he said, his tone disappointed. “But I’ll send a few of my best men with you.”

“Soren, that wouldn’t be necessary.” It reminded me of being back at the Drogomor pack. I did like some of those guards and often wondered how they were and if they’d gotten in trouble for me escaping. But that didn’t mean I wanted to be followed around again.

“I can tell them to stay at a distance, and you can take Seraphine with you,” Soren suggested.

I compromised. “Okay, that will be alright.”

Soren reached over and squeezed my arm. “I know you’re safe here, Ro. I just don’t want anything to happen to you again, like what happened on the other island.”

I didn’t want that to happen either. If anything happened to the baby....

I decided it was worth it to have someone follow me to make sure the baby was safe. “Thanks,” I said, smiling.

Soren’s hand lingered on my arm for a few moments, and I didn’t pull away. It was comforting, and I knew it was only there because he cared about me as a friend—nothing more.

“I’ll be back early this evening,” he said, “Maybe we can have dinner together?”

I was curious. “Any special occasion?” | asked.

“Every day is special with you,” he laughed. “By the way, there’s a dress shop between the general store and the pawnshop. Why don’t you get yourself a new dress?” He reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet, grabbing several large bills and dropping them on the table in front of me.

I stared at the money for a long moment, not knowing what to say. I didn’t want to take it. “Soren...” I began.

“Hey, don’t pretend like you haven’t earned it. This is your salary for watching that house over there for me.” He pointed to the mansion at the other end of the estate. “Also, not many people in this world get their own personal concerts every night, especially not by a woman with a voice as angelic as yours.”

He smiled at me, but his phone rang, making him mumble under his breath. “Let me get this.”

I nodded, and he reached into his pocket, pulling out his phone, and moving away from the table to talk to whoever was calling.

I took another bite of my toast, and that’s when my eyes focused on the newspaper.

The picture—the headline.

“Marriage Plans Move Forward Despite War.”

I read the words and then looked down at the picture to see Madalynn’s face smiling up at me.

My stomach twisted into a knot. I felt like my new life was being invaded by my old. The urge to throw away the newspaper filled me, but I had to let it go. This was Soren’s paper, after all. I wanted to ask him why he had a paper from the capital, but I figured it had something to do with **business. He read papers from all over.**

Then, my eyes focused on something else. It was something on Madalynn’s neck. Something familiar...

It was Ethan’s ring! Madalynn was wearing Ethan’s ring!

Yes, I knew it was his. He never, ever took that ring off. It had his family insignia on it. I recognized the black and gold bands.

He gave her something that meant so much to him?

Unless... she meant so much to him...

Could it be that he’d finally decided that he loved Madalynn? Had my leaving been what they needed for the two of them to get together?

“Are you all right, Ro?”

Soren’s voice cut through my thoughts. I tipped my head up to look at him, and I could tell by his **expression that** I must’ve looked awfully upset. He was looking at me with deep concern on his face.

I couldn't tell him the truth. He didn't know anything about my connection to Ethan or the capital. I set the paper down and came up with a lie. "Oh, uh... there was a missing dog. It reminded me of when my dog went missing when I was little."

He stared at me for a long moment and then said, "I guess I missed that."

I swallowed hard. "Just a little ad in the back of the paper."

His head rocked back and forth. "That is sad. I hope they find it."

"Me, too."

Soren blew out a deep breath. "I have to go."

"Okay." I mustered a smile, but my head was all over the place.

"Ro.. would it be all right if... could I have a hug?"

I studied his face for a moment, and I thought it was really strange that he was asking on his own behalf right then. Could he sense how badly I needed a friend?

"Sure," I said. I pulled myself up from the chair, and as he came around the table, I wrapped my arms around his neck. His strong arms came around my middle, and I melted into his shoulder, barely able to keep my tears from falling

Soren smoothed my hair, and his strong, masculine scent made me feel protected. It reminded me that I was all right, that he was taking care of me, and that my old life was far behind. It didn't matter what Ethan was doing anymore. If he was with Madalynn now, and they were happy, that was a good thing.

He wasn't mine anymore.

He never had been mine to begin with.

We stood that way for several minutes before I realized Soren needed to go, and I couldn't continue to hold him. *We were* just friends, and it was silly for me to expect him to delay his day for me. I took a step back and unfurled myself from him

Soren wasn't so quick to let go, though. He placed his strong hands on my arms. "Are you okay, cutie?" he **asked**.

I liked that he was using a term of endearment. "I'm fine," I told him, and I managed a true smile, looking into his **eyes**.

"I can cancel my meeting and stay here with you today, if you need me to. We can go shopping and have lunch."

“No, no,” I shook my head. “You should go. I’ll be all right.”

“Are you sure?” He tipped his head to the side and studied my face.

“I’m sure,” I told him. “Thank you, but you should go.”

“All right,” he said. “But you call me if you need me to come back, and I will be right here.”

“Thank you, Soren,” I told him. “You’re a good friend.”

His eyebrows raised slightly at that last word, but then he nodded.

He finally let go of me and headed out. I took a few deep breaths and watched as Lola cleared the table. “We don’t need that newspaper,” I told her as I put the money away in a drawer.

I walked into the other room to get ready to go shopping and caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror.

The necklace. I hadn’t taken it off since I’d gotten here.

Things had changed, though. As much as I loved the necklace, as beautiful of a memory as I had of Ethan giving it to me, things changed, and life *moved* on. Ethan had moved on, and it was time for me to do the same—one *way* or another

The first step was to let go of this necklace.

Chapter 77 She Sold The Necklace

As I looked through other colors of yarn, Seraphine leaned in toward my ear and whispered, “Elliott is kind of cute, isn’t he?”

I wanted to make sure I had enough yellow yarn to finish the baby blanket I’d started crocheting without having to come back to the store, so I grabbed several skeins and put the guards who Soren had insisted come with me to use.

Their names were Elliott and Duke—I’d asked. They’d looked surprised that I’d wanted to know, but I wasn’t about to walk around town with two men and not even know their names.

Raising an eyebrow, I looked back over my shoulder. He was tall with dark, curly hair that sort of did its own thing. Duke was shorter with blond hair. Both of them were muscular, as one would expect bodyguards to be.

I was honest. “I hadn’t noticed. Frankly, I’m surprised you did.” Seraphine was much older than me, definitely not the type of woman one would expect to be giggling over young cute boys.

“I’m not looking for me,” she gently tapped the tip of my nose. “It’s just... you need to start thinking about your future. You’re a beautiful single woman. Just because you’re about to have a baby, that doesn’t mean that your life is over. You and Mr. Soren insist that you’re just friends, so you may as well look for another man that you’re interested in romantically.”

I didn’t know what Seraphine was getting at exactly, but I wasn’t interested in dating any of the guards, or anyone. “Thank you, Seraphine,” I smiled, “But I think I’ll wait until after the baby is born to think about potentially dating.”

Seraphine didn’t say anything else, and I grabbed several more skeins of yarn, this time in a dark blue color, before leading the way up to the counter to pay for everything.

Once I’d made my purchase here, I headed over to the dress shop.

But I stopped short of going in.

Another store caught my eye.

A pawnshop.

I remembered Soren mentioning it that morning over breakfast, but it wasn’t until right that moment that I realized that I needed to enter the store. “Seraphine,” I said, tugging on her arm. “I need to go in here.”

“Into the pawnshop?” she questioned. “Why?”

I didn’t answer her. Instead, I walked inside and headed up to the counter, my fingers going to the back of my neck with determination, I needed to do this.

I unhooked my necklace and set it down on the counter. “How much would you give me for this?” I asked the man.

I glanced up at him. He was older, with scrutinizing green eyes and white hair. “Is it real?” he asked me.

“It is,” I said, figuring he had ways of telling whether or not the jewels were real.

He made a noise in the back of his throat that made me think he didn’t believe me.

Seraphine looked at the man’s shifty eyes, she cleared her throat, seemingly talking only to me, but I was sure the man could hear it. “Miss, don’t worry, they will give us a fair price. You know, good thing that we had our guards with us today.” And then she looked outside and glanced over at the two guards, implying to the man that if he wasn’t honest, he might get himself in trouble.

He narrowed his eyes and looked at me, Seraphine and the guards, then pulled out a tool from beneath his counter, he examined the gemstones. His tone changed. "I'll be," he mumbled. "They are real."

"Yes, they are," I confirmed.

The amount of money he offered me for the necklace was so much, I almost fell backward onto the linoleum floor. I understand that it was probably worth even more than that because pawnshops never give a person what their item is actually worth. They have to make a profit, too. I didn't care. I took the money.

And I didn't wait around for him to fill out a form so that I could get it back in a few months if I paid him back the money.

I wouldn't be doing that.

After I had the money, I went to the dress shop and picked out a beautiful red dress to wear to dinner with Soren. I noticed he liked it when I wore red. He was always complimentary, no matter what I wore, but when I wore red, he told me I was beautiful even more than when I wore other colors.

As we were getting ready to pay, Seraphine said, "Oh, Ro! Look at this necklace!"

It was a simple diamond pendant in the shape of an infinity loop, but it was very pretty, and I needed something else to wear now that my neck was bare. I liked how the infinity figure-eight symbolized that life went on, no matter how our circumstances changed.

I thought of my baby and how we had made it this far, against the odds. The necklace seemed perfect.

I added the necklace to my purchases and paid before heading home.

Once we got there, I started crocheting, but I wasn't working on the baby's blanket at the moment. I had another project in mind.

About six o'clock, I got a text from Soren.

"I'll be there in about an hour to pick you up. Will you have enough time to get ready?"

He was always so polite. No ordering me around or demanding that I drop everything.

"Yes, that's plenty of time," I told him. Then I added, "How was your day?"

He sent an emoji that told me his day had been a bit irritating, but then said, "It's about to get a whole lot better as soon as I see you." He was always so sweet.

I got dressed in the red gown I'd bought. I also put on some strappy silver sandals I'd gotten. They were flats. I didn't want to take any chances of falling. I put on some diamond earrings, one of Soren's gifts, and the necklace. It seemed a little strange having it on, but I was glad to have something back around my neck, and it did look nice.

When I was all ready to go, I dropped Soren's finished gift into a bag, one of the many I had collected from the presents he'd given me, and headed to the living room to wait for him.

It was only a few minutes before he knocked on the door. When I opened it, he was standing there with a bright smile and a bouquet of red tulips, his tie the same shade of red as my gown. "How did you know?" | asked.

"Oh, come on!" he said. "My guards are good at something."

I laughed and he leaned in to kiss my cheek. His lips were warm and his breath was minty, but I felt safe and respected as any friend should.

I put the flowers away and then extended the bag to him. "And for once, I have a gift for you!"

"A gift for me?" He seemed shocked. "Really?"

"Yeah," I said, suddenly feeling shy. What if he didn't like it? "I mean... you might not get to use it much around here." I suddenly felt really silly for making it, actually. It wasn't the kind of gift a person who lived on an island needed.

Soren pulled out the scarf I had crocheted for him. I expected him to be polite and say how thoughtful I was, how nice it was for me to think of him. But I didn't expect it to be sincere. It was a scarf—and we lived on a tropical island. What was I thinking even making it for him?

"Is this a scarf?" Soren asked, his eyes widening. "Did you make this?" He didn't wait for me to answer. "Oh, wow! Ro, this is amazing! It's so thick and warm—this is perfect! You know, I do so much traveling, and I go to cold places sometimes, and I never have one of these because I live on a tropical island. Well, obviously, you must've been thinking about that because you made this. You are so amazing, Ro!" He leaned in and hugged me so tightly, I could tell he really meant it.

I couldn't believe it—he was really excited and happy that I had made him a scarf, despite the climate here.

"You're welcome," I hugged him back—politely.

Soren let go of me but offered his hand. "Shall we?" he asked.

"Sure," I said, taking it.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I thought we’d drive into town and go to a restaurant for dinner tonight. When I heard that you’d bought a beautiful dress, I didn’t want to keep you at home. I wanted to show you off to everyone.”

I couldn’t help but smile at him. “Sure. That sounds fun.” I’d never had anyone want to show me off before—at least, not that they would admit.

“Great.” We walked along together beneath a sky transitioning from pinks and oranges to a field of dark blue full of stars, and I felt like I was truly appreciated in every way.

I lifted my hand to finger my necklace, like I did a thousand times a day. It felt different between my fingers—it was a different necklace, and the symbol meant something different. But it also meant Ethan wasn’t the only one who had moved on.

Chapter 78 Boy Or Girl?

“Where are we going?”

“Just a little place downtown. There aren’t a lot of places on the island, but there are a few. I think you’ll like this place. It’s one of my favorites.”

I smiled at him. I liked to see him get excited, and he had that little twinkle in his eye when he was talking. “Am I dressed appropriately?” I asked, worried more about my shoes than my dress, but I wasn’t used to wearing heels **anyway**.

“Are you kidding?” he asked, his eyes widening. “You’ll be the most beautiful woman there.”

I felt my face turning the same shade as my dress. “You’re so kind,” I told him. “Really, your mother must be quite a woman. She raised you so nicely.”

His eyes shifted, and a shadow passed over his face. He cleared his throat and looked out the window, and I thought I must’ve said something I shouldn’t have. “I’m sorry,” I began.

Just as soon as the shadow was there, it was gone, and he was back to his amiable self, a wide smile on his face. He didn’t say anything about his mother, though, only, “They have this great pasta dish at the restaurant. I think you’ll really love it. Of course, you can order anything you like. Alfonso, the chef, is a good friend of mine.”

I wasn’t sure what to say. I thought maybe I should apologize for upsetting him, but I also didn’t want to make him look like that ever again. “Great,” I clapped cheerfully. “I love pasta.”

“Did you really make this scarf in one day?” he asked, pulling part of it out of the bag that was sitting between us in the seat.

“I did,” I told him. “It wasn’t that difficult since it was just a straight stitch in one color.”

“That’s amazing,” he said, shaking his head. “I think if I tried to crochet something, I’d end up with my fingers all twisted up in the yarn, and I’d be trapped for the rest of my life.”

I giggled. He could be so silly.

A few minutes later, the car pulled over to the curb, and the driver opened the door. I got out first, and then Soren followed. He offered his arm, and we walked in together.

Every head turned in our direction, and Soren waved and smiled. I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t help but smile. *Everyone was being so friendly, but waving seemed a bit much since I didn’t know anyone.*

“Mr. Soren!” a man in a tuxedo with a fancy mustache said from behind the maître D stand. “Welcome! Your table is ready, sir.”

“Thank you,” Soren said, and we followed him down the aisle. I still felt like I was being stared at, but once we *were* seated, the table was so private, it was much better.

We had excellent service, and almost immediately, I had sparkling cider and water in front of me. I decided to try the pasta dish Soren suggested, and he ordered some sort of steak and red wine.

This was a fancy restaurant, and I couldn’t help but look around in awe. It was like something out of one of the books I had been reading.

“So.” he said, spreading his napkin in his lap, “how is the baby?”

I stared at him for a moment, not sure how to answer that question. “As far as I can tell, the baby is fine.”

“How’s the kicking been today?” he asked me, taking a drink of his wine.

“Well, the baby is so small, when those tiny feet kick me, it’s like a butterfly wing tickling my internal organs.”

He laughed, like I was kidding, but it was pretty accurate, from what I could tell. “You should be able to find out whether it’s a boy or a girl soon.”

I shook my head. “I think I’ve decided I don’t want to know.”

His eyes widened. “Really? Why is that?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I think I just want the surprise. Like back before they had this sort of technology. I’d like to be surprised and hear Seraphine say, ‘It’s a boy!’ or ‘It’s a girl!’” | smiled, imagining what I just said, and took a drink of my water.

“And which do you hope it is? A boy or a girl?”

“I don’t know,” I said again. I used to think it must be a boy, and he would be a great Alpha just like his father. But now, I really didn’t know. I meant it. “I will be happy with either.” In my mind, I had visions of myself running through the garden with a beautiful little girl in a dress while I had also seen a sweet little boy with his father’s eyes standing on the beach.

I did wonder, if I had a boy, would he grow up to be like his father? I wasn’t sure that I wanted that for my son. Ethan needed to work on his emotions—to put it lightly.

Soren’s expression didn’t change for a second, and he seemed to be studying my face. “I think it would be incredible if you had a little girl who looked like you. But then, a little boy would be wonderful, too. I’d love to have a little boy to play ball with or teach to surf.”

“Do you surf?” This was the first time I’d heard him mention it. “That’s amazing!”

“Oh, yeah. Well... I mean... it’s been a while. I’ve been so busy. But I do know how to surf.” He emphasized the word “how.”

“Maybe when I’m done giving birth, you can teach me. I would love to learn.” I wanted to branch out and have more life experiences.

“Definitely!” Soren said. “I would love that! I bet you’d get it right off the bat!”

“Why do you say that?” I chuckled. I was glad I didn’t have any liquid in my mouth.

“Because

you’re so graceful. And you try so hard at everything you do.”

I couldn’t help but smile at him. He was so kind. Why couldn’t more people in the world be like Soren?

The waitress brought out dishes, and they smelled delicious. I tasted the pasta, and Soren was right. It was one of the best things I’d ever put in my mouth. I couldn’t help the sound that came out of my mouth—it **was a moan** of pleasure that border-line made me embarrassed.

Soren laughed so hard, he almost fell out of his chair. “Well, I was going to ask if you liked it, but I guess I don’t need to.”

“Sorry,” I said, covering my face with my hand.

“No, don’t be sorry. No one else is paying attention to us. I just can’t wait until you try the **chocolate mousse.**”

“If it’s going to make that sound come out of my mouth, we may need to get it to go,” I reasoned.

Again, he laughed and cut into his steak. He was quiet for a moment, as if he was trying to figure out whether he should say it or not.

“You’ve changed, Ro,” he paused, looking at me. “I liked you when we met initially, but now I like you more. Either way, you are still just you.”

He put down his silverware, and said it sincerely. “I know you don’t like to talk about your past, but I have to say, whoever it is that you’re running away from, I sure hope that person is miserable.”

I almost dropped my fork. I wasn’t expecting him to say that. I looked up at him through my eyelashes for a moment, trying to formulate a response.

Soren just kept talking. “They deserve it. To be sitting at home alone, drowning in their own tears, realizing that they had so much, and now they have nothing. Absolutely nothing.”

He seemed to have made his point, so I cleared my throat. “Thanks,” I said because it was the polite thing to say.

I knew why he had said it. He was trying to pay me a compliment, trying to say that I was so great that anyone who was used to having me around but suddenly didn’t have me in their life anymore would miss me.

But Soren was wrong. I was certain that Ethan was not drowning in his own tears. The newspaper I’d seen this morning had told me that. I wondered if he ever even thought about me anymore. If anything, he was probably still mourning the baby.

But not me.

I was certain he wasn’t thinking about me.

“I propose a toast,” Soren said, getting me out of my head and back to the present.

“Oh?” I asked. “To what?”

“Why, to you, of course!” he replied. Lifting his glass, he said, “To a beautiful, intelligent, loving mother-to-be who has recreated herself and refuses to give up, no matter what, so that her child will have the best life possible.”

“I’ll drink to that,” I said. “But, I also want to drink to you,” I added. “To a wonderful man who will do anything for his friends—even when he’s just met them—and helps them get on their feet. Who gives of himself and sprinkles kindness on *everyone* like confetti!” Soren’s left eye narrowed slightly, just a bit, for a split second, before the look was gone.

“I can drink to that.” His voice was gentle.

We clinked glasses and drank, and I knew it was going to be a good night.

Because Soren was a good man.

Chapter 79 He Got The Necklace

****Ethan's POV**

The maps on my desk were beginning to blur together. Mostly, I was thinking about the war efforts—but sometimes about other matters.

Rosalie. The baby. The letter.

I couldn't think about it. I couldn't let my mind go there, not at all...

She had made her request of me, and I needed to honor that and live my life the way she wished. Except, how could I be happy without her?

I looked at the maps again, concentrating on the new Xs we'd drawn for the new attacks, trying to come up with a plan. It was late, and most of the others had long gone to bed.

So I was surprised when there was a knock at my door.

At first, I thought perhaps I had imagined it. I looked up, waiting to see if I heard it again. Instead, the door opened just a bit, and Talon stuck his head in.

We hadn't talked much since he'd told me the truth about Rosalie. I was angry at him, but I knew I really needed to be thinking about my own actions in this entire matter.

I wasn't ready for that yet.

"What is it?" | grumbled at him, returning my eyes to the maps, pretending to be so busy, I could hardly spare the time to look up at him at all.

Talon came into the room quietly, moving like he was afraid I had been asleep or still was. He cleared his throat and stood in front of my desk.

I should've caught on right then and there that it was important.

I looked up at him. "What is it?"

Alpha, from time to time, some traders come in from the islands. Even now, with the war going on, that still happens. One of them had some nice jewelry pieces..."

I was confused by what he was saying, but I decided to continue to listen.

“...Vicky decided to take a look at them because she thought she might find a necklace or bracelet or something to cheer up the little girl, Lily, whose mother is still missing...”

I listened to him drone on and on, still wondering what the h*ll any of this had to do with me. “And?” I asked him, finally losing all my patience.

“And... while Vicky was browsing the jewelry one of the traders had brought in... she found this.”

He pulled a piece of jewelry out of his pocket and held it out to me.

My eyes were a little unfocused from staring at the maps, so I wasn't sure I was seeing the necklace correctly at first.

But after a moment of staring, I was certain I was seeing it.

I would recognize that piece of jewelry anywhere.

It hung there in the **shadows cast** by the dim light from the lamp on my desk like a ghost, haunting me from beyond the grave, the gemstones catching the light and winking at me mockingly.

My hands flexed on the desk in front of me. I wanted to reach out and touch it, but I also didn't want to. I was afraid my fingers would fly right through it, like it was a hologram.

Looking up at Talon, I managed to ask him, “Wh-where did he get it?”

Talon shook his head and drew the necklace back up into his fist. I hated that I couldn't see it anymore, but then, it was for the best—for now. “He got it in Avondale from another trader. I want to show you first and see if you want us to investigate further.”

“Avondale...” I repeated. My heart began to pound in my chest as a thousand questions flooded my mind.

How did it get there? Was it possible that she was still alive...?

gone,

“I know what you're thinking,” Talon said, his voice calm. “Ethan.. we found evidence that Rosalie is remember?” he asked me.

I nodded. Of course, he was right. It was stupid of me to think there was a chance that the young woman who sold the necklace could be Rosalie.

Besides, there were a million other explanations for how the necklace could've gotten **there**.

“Anyway, Vicky bought it for you. She thought you would want it. I wasn't sure. I didn't know if having it around would... keep you from moving on.”

Moving on. Those were two words I couldn't wrap my mind around.

I did know that I needed to have the necklace, though. I'd carried Rosalie's letter around in my pocket for so long without even opening it, why wouldn't I want the necklace?

I stuck my hand out, and Talon dropped the necklace in my palm.

The moment her necklace touched my skin, I felt a chill run down my spine.

This was her necklace, something she'd touched. Something she'd worn around her neck. Something she'd kept close to her heart. Something she'd had with her when she'd ...,

I put it in my pocket. “Thanks, Talon. You can go.” I dismissed him with a *wave* of my hand.

He didn't go right away, though. He just stood there, staring at me.

Sighing, I looked up at him. “What?”

“Nothing,” he said. “I just.. are you all right? I mean, I know that you have a lot of work, and there's **the stress of** the war, and you have been eating and sleeping better, but there's so much going on—”

I cut him off, “I'm fine, Talon.” This wasn't the first time I'd had this conversation with him. “I like your short and sweet reporting style better.”

I gave him another dismissive *wave*. **He seemed to** be a bit shocked at my comments. It had been a while since I made any comments outside of *work* or – her.

Talon finally left.

Once he was gone, I took a moment to look at the necklace and remembered how beautiful Rosalie had looked when she'd had it on. Her eyes had twinkled, and she'd been so surprised.

It had been one of my favorite memories of her.

And it had also been one of my last memories of her.

With the necklace still in my hand, I closed my eyes and leaned my head back. For just a moment, I let my mind go to a place it shouldn't.

I imagined Rosalie, obviously alive, and dressed in a cute sundress, her stomach a bit bigger than it was the last time I'd seen her. She was walking along with a beach bag flung over her arm, a carefree smile on her face.

She walked into a pawnshop and plunked the necklace down on the counter. "I need to sell this," she said.

Just like that, she'd traded her last memory of me for cash and went on about her business, that smile still on her face.

And why not?

Why should she keep any memories of me?

She knew what I intended to do to her, so why wouldn't she want to get rid of everything there was to remind me of her?

I would've traded anything for that to happen— for her to finally have her own life, her free life.

I shook my head, reminding myself that it was a stupid fantasy anyway. Rosalie hadn't taken her necklace to a pawnshop because Rosalie was dead. *We* 'd found evidence of her death.

I'd seen her fling herself over the edge of the cliff. The fact that I was holding something that had once belonged to her didn't change any of that.

All this did was open a wound, rip open a scab, take me back several weeks in time to when Rosalie had first disappeared.

I sat there at my desk with my head in my hands, trying to get myself together. My hand touched my pocket, where her letter lay. She never knew that she had her magical healing power that no one else held — even if she only existed in my memory.

Sometimes, the weight of the war and all of its repercussions, mingled together with the pain I was feeling, radiating from my heart, out through every fiber of my being, was almost too much for me to handle. I wanted to ram my fist through a wall or knock my desk over and scatter my maps and notes all over the floor. However, as long as I pulled out her letter, I felt I could make it through, because that was her wish.

It was late, and I had been working too hard, so I decided to go outside and get some fresh air. I walked automatically, without thinking to the cliffs, and before I realized it, I was standing on the edge, the water swirling beneath me, the wind stirring my hair, cooling my heated skin.

The necklace *was* wound around my hand. I took it out and looked at it again. The jewels were dazzling in the moonlight. I tried to remember if I'd seen it around Rosalie's neck as she'd stood right here. In the image in my head, I could see her tears, her outstretched arm, and then, her

body as it hung in the air, but I couldn't remember seeing the moonlight catch the stones as it was right now.

That didn't mean anything. I wasn't focused on the necklace.

Theld it out over the edge of the cliffs and watched it twinkle. Dropping it now could mean it would make its way right back to the islands via the current, which was probably how it had gotten there last time. Either that or

some lucky treasure hunter had found it on the cliffs and taken it to the pawnshop.

There was no point in throwing it in—the necklace would just keep coming back to me.

Just like my thoughts of Rosalie.

They would never, ever go away.

Chapter 80 I Have To Find Her

“Alpha, we received the report from Papeno,” Samuel said as he rushed into the war room.

James had purposely kept Romero away from today's meetings until we received this info. It was only my men and the king in the war room.

“Go ahead,” I said.

“We confirmed that military vessels have been sighted.”

I sneered, “As expected.”

James turned to me. “So you think Romero is allowing them to restock and refuel on his island?”

James and I had suspicions as to Romero's strategy. If he had been playing both sides of the field, most likely, he would have made the same deal with Kal as he did with us.

My gut was telling me he was lending some small islands to Alpha Kal for their military operations.

“Logically, it explains our problems.” | paced back to the map. “There's an open ocean between Kal and us. If they didn't have a middle point, they would need more large cargo ships to carry the smaller vessels, which we would have been able to locate as soon as they entered our waters.”

Turning back to face James, I continued, “But we didn't, because those ships are much smaller. But that means they need to be restocked and refueled somewhere much closer to us.”

James responded, “Even if that’s the case, there’s no value in confronting him. We still need to work with him.”

“True. Especially since Romero could just say those are his own ships.”

Most importantly, we didn’t want to alert him to the fact that *we* were on to him.

“How many vessels are there?” I asked Samuel.

“*We* saw four, but we estimated two more to be on patrol.”

James and I exchanged a look— six ships. Someone higher in rank had to be around to oversee their operation.

“*Were* you able to locate which island their leader might be stationed on?”

“No, Alpha. Papeno is not a single island; it’s a group of them. While we could see several naval bases, they were guarded by Romero’s men. Kal’s commander could be on any of the nearby islands.”

I looked at James, silently asking if that was enough evidence to order a trip to Romero’s islands.

After a *moment*, he nodded his head,

I took over the meeting and laid out the operation plan.

“I need a team of thirty, divided into three groups—twelve, twelve, and six. The goal of this mission is to **assassinate** the target in charge of the operations around Papeno. Additionally, **we are here to** obtain a detailed map of the islands and where their supplies are. If needed— if we fail to achieve our primary objective—then, in the future, *we* can send men to destroy their supplies.”

James never interfered with my work. Once I got his go-ahead, I was fully in charge of the **operation**.

“We’ll blend in as civilians. Group A will get to Avondale on day two and plan the best route to Papeno. Group B will get to Avondale on day four and locate the target island. Group C will meet with Group B on day six, approach the target, and execute the assassination.”

“Blend in how?” James interjected. I knew he asked out of curiosity, not out of doubting my competency.

I didn’t answer him, instead, I turned to Samuel.

“Are there regular merchant ships to Papeno?”

James and the others stopped speaking and looked at me with furrowed brows, confused by my question.

“Yes Alpha,” Samuel said. “From what the reports show, several ships enter the port daily.”

I nodded.

“We’ll dress as merchants and board a boat from the East Port to Avondale. From there, go to Papeno pretending to be tradesmen in search of work or delivering cargo.”

I looked at James and explained, “That’s how we blend in.”

I turned to the assembled soldiers and continued assigning tasks. “Samuel, you are in charge of Group A, and Richard, Group B.”

Everyone was quietly waiting for the assignment for Group C.

“Talon,” I said, looking up at him. My most trusted subordinate nodded his head, accepting the appointment

“You will stay in the capital and assist the King to oversee the operation on the west coast.” I finished.

I added, “I will be leading Group C.”

James raised his eyebrow. I saw disapproval in his gaze, but he didn’t say anything.

I nodded to him, and looked around the room. “If there are no questions, you are dismissed.”

Everyone left, except for James.

“Ethan, you are the next in line to the throne. You cannot run off and put yourself in danger.”

“I understand,” I said. “I won’t.” But I dropped **my eyes**.

I dipped my fingers into my jacket pocket and ran them over the cool metal of Rosalie’s necklace.

“I didn’t see any reason why you have to go in person for this mission,” James argued, trying to **pressure me to** rethink my plan.

“This is one of the biggest leads we’ve gotten so far, and it is crucial for the outcome of the war,” I replied, keeping my tone professional. I need to get first-hand information to better evaluate our enemy.”

“Just that?”

“...Yes,” I said.

However, I couldn't lie to myself.

Every inch of evidence pointed to the fact she had fallen to her death, but what if there was the slightest chance that she didn't?

What if I could find her?

James sighed. “Alright, then. Take whoever you need to accomplish your task. Be safe.”

“I will,” I said, and saw him wave his hand to allow me **to leave the room.**

When I returned to my suite, Talon was already standing outside, waiting for me.

“Alpha, how am I going to explain your absence to the other alphas?”

“I was planning to go to the frontlines on the West Coast, anyway. Tell them I decided to go a few days early.”

Talon nodded, and then paused.

“Ethan, be honest with me. Why do you want to go in person?”

Talon would never challenge my decision, but that didn't mean that he wouldn't ask for explanations.

“**Because we cannot afford to fail,**” I replied coolly.

He ignored my comment, and asked, “Is it because of the necklace?”

I raised an eyebrow, but I didn't deny it. Talon knew me too well, there was no point in lying to him.

He sighed, and pulled out a piece of paper with an address on it.

“I knew you wouldn't give up on her. We found out that, before the necklace got to the trade merchant, it was seen in a jewelry shop in Avondale.”

The light piece of paper felt like it weighed tons in my palm.

“I didn't want to get your hopes up. Do what you will with this information. Good luck.” Talon **turned to leave.**

“Talon,” I called, causing him to stop.

“Yes, Alpha?”

“Thank you,” I said.

“You’re welcome.” He sighed and closed the door.

I looked out the window, my gaze landing on the horizon.

I would have a couple days in Avondale before the mission really began.

Would I find the person I was longing to see?

For a moment, I let myself imagine gazing at her again, seeing her beautiful face illuminated by the tropical sun, the breeze stirring her hair.

What would she say to her?

How would she react to seeing me?

I hadn’t thought that part through yet, and I knew it was futile to let my mind wander that far. I was getting ahead of myself,

What was the point in torturing myself with thoughts of how to explain my idiotic plan to Rosalie— when I didn’t *even* know if she was still alive?

For now, I just needed to concentrate on getting to the island and identifying the enemy. But maybe I could also

pay a trip to the shop where the necklace **had been seen, so that** I could trick myself into thinking **I was one step** closer to her

The piece of paper Talon had just given me was the first step. Just like a sequence in a military operation, would follow the tasks, one by one, and check them off the list until I had completed my mission.

That was the best way to go about this.

And in the end... my heart was telling me...

I would have my Rosalie again.

Perhaps it didn’t make any logical sense, considering I had seen her jump from a cliff. I had a box with her bones in it. I had a suicide letter. I had a necklace in my pocket that could’ve been washed ashore and found by any other woman and pawned off.

But every time I closed my eyes and saw her face, I felt certain that she was alive.

Then, there was that strange pull I kept feeling deep inside of me, that sensation that I was being tugged in a specific direction by an unknown force.

That made me hopeful that she was alive, and so was our child.

If I were to tell King James, Talon, or anyone else the truth, they'd think I was a stupid, wasting valuable time and resources chasing a fool's errand.

But they didn't understand what I was feeling. They didn't know what I knew in my heart.

If Rosalie was out there, I had to find her. Even if it was just for one more second—one more glimpse of her face, one more glance at her smile.

Even if the only thing I ever got to do was hear her laughter one more time, I needed to know.

I needed to see that she was alive.

Even if she never knew that I had found her.