

Kings Breeder 501

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 501

Lena

The dean's office was located on the edge of campus, situated on the shore of the massive lake that separated the small city of Morhan from the sprawling metropolis of Breles. I could see the water from where I sat. The deep blue water was glistening beyond the ceiling-height windows in the dean's office, blocked by the figure of Assistant Dean Redmon, who was seated behind the dean's desk.

"Dean Weatherford couldn't be here today," Assistant Dean Redmon murmured, flipping a page of the file he was holding-my file. I could see my name printed at the top.

"Why am I here?" I asked, stifling the tremble in my voice. I'd never been in trouble at school before, not once in my entire life.

The assistant dean glanced up at me, his eyes fixated on mine for a moment. He was an older man, slight of build with short, wispy Slate hair. But his eyes, a strange sea-green color, were kind, which I was thankful for. He looked somewhat sorry for me as he glanced down at his watch and then turned his focus toward the door.

"There was a report of misconduct between you and an adjunct professor."

I knew it. I'd had a glimmer of hope that whoever had made the report had made it against Slate, and I was only here to corroborate it and give my side of the story.

But to my horror, Slate walked through the door, looking as smug as could be. He leaned against the wall, facing me with a smirk on his face. Assistant Dean Redmon looked him up and down before sighing heavily and turning his attention to my file once more.

"Morhan College's code of ethics firmly states that students and professors are strictly forbidden from entering into any kind of intimate relationship. You signed the code of ethics, Lena, so I'm not going to ask you if you're familiar--"

"I know," I said firmly, feeling a blush rise to my cheeks.

"Slate Tamlin reported to Dean Weatherford that you have made several advances toward him over the last quarter, including waiting outside the first-year building for his classes to dismiss, if this is correct?"

I almost choked. I looked from Assistant Dean Redmon to Slate.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Professor Tamlin," Slate corrected, looking down at his manicured fingernails. "It's professor--"

"Is it true, Lena, that you have been pursuing a romantic relationship with--"

"No!" I exclaimed, gripping the armrests of my chair hard enough to turn my knuckles white. "Whatever Professor Tamlin told you is not even close to the truth. I'd like to talk to you privately, Dean Redmon, please?" My voice was shaking, but at the moment I didn't care. Slate looked entirely pleased with himself. He chuckled lightly as he rolled his eyes, looking at Redmon.

“It’s an expellable offense,” Slate said smugly, turning his eyes back on me. ‘Isn’t it, Lena?’”

“Dean Redmon, please,” I said as I rose from my chair. “I haven’t been trying to pursue a relationship with Professor Tamlin, not in the slightest. In fact, I’ve been trying to avoid him at all costs. He shows up at my apartment-”

Assistant Dean Redmon raised his hand, demanding quiet. I snapped my mouth shut, breathing heavily through my nose as I glanced over at Slate. He looked somewhat nervous as he waited for Assistant Dean Redmon to speak.

“My uncle said-” Slate began, but Assistant Dean Redmon waved his hand in dismissal.

“Your uncle can counsel you at a different time about the accusations brought forth against you, Professor Tamlin. For now, I’d like to speak to her alone.” It wasn’t a question, and I could see the look of surprise, and anxiety, flash across his face.

Slate hadn’t expected Assistant Dean Redmon to want to speak to me alone. He’d probably asked to be here, and because he was Dean Weatherford’s nephew and didn’t let anyone forget it, his request was quickly granted.

But I had thrown his accusation back in his face by telling the truth, and Assistant Dead Redmon couldn’t ignore that.

Slate left the room, giving one last parting look of marked disapproval before slamming the door on his way out.

I swallowed hard, looking up at Assistant Dean Redmon expectantly.

“What exactly happened between you and Professor Tamlin?” he asked, sighing as he closed my file. He leaned back in his seat, crossing his arms over his chest.

“A friend, and her boyfriend, invited me to go to dinner with them in Breles and Professor Tamlin was there. Her boyfriend didn’t know he was a professor at our school... and I didn’t know he was going to be there. It was a double date. I can admit that. But it was a blind date, I wasn’t interested in taking things further. I denied any advances he made toward me during that weekend, which was over the summer break, and... when I came back to campus, he continued to bother me. He has recently started showing up at the apartment I share with my roommates, throwing pebbles at my window at all hours of the night. I have to walk by the first-year building on my way to the greenhouses, and he waits until I walk by, trying to talk to me. I try to plan it so... so he’s still in class when I walk by, but it doesn’t always work.”

I ran my tongue along my lower lip, looking down at my lap.

“Earlier today,” I continued, “he stopped me outside of the first-year building. He is under the impression we’re mates. We aren’t. I’m not twenty-one yet, but I know he is not my mate, and won’t be when I come of age, but he is insistent-”

“This isn’t the first time he’s done something like this,” assistant Dean Redmon said as he ran his hand over his face, pinching the bridge of his nose as he gathered his thoughts.

“How is he still allowed to work on campus, then?” I stammered, shocked by the assistant dean’s admission.

Redmon shrugged, shaking his head. “His uncle-Weatherford-doesn’t want bad press, and it’s easier to dismiss the student than it is to put the blame on his own flesh and blood. Slate Tamlin has been a problem for years, but this is the first time he’s come forward with accusations against a student, rather than it being the other way around.”

“What can you do about it?” I tried to hide the desperation in my voice, but failed.

Redmon bit the inside of his cheek as he looked down at my file, shaking his head in defeat. “The dean has already put in for your credits to transfer to the University of Mirage. You’d start fresh in January-”

“Transfer!” I exclaimed, feeling the tears begin to well in my eyes. “I can’t transfer! I’m supposed to graduate in December. I have my last final next week. The botany program in Mirage is not-not even close to Morhan’s!”

A transfer would set me back two entire years. I’d have to complete the University of Mirage’s required undergraduate courses before I could even begin whatever courses they require in their botany program that were different from Morhan’s curriculum. The school I was attending now was specialized and so different from the one in Mirage.

I was panicking now. I rose from my chair again, ready to get on my knees and beg.

“I have one final, that’s it. Then my field study. I put in for Red Lakes; I’d be gone for six weeks. I wouldn’t need to come back to campus again after that, Assistant Dean Redmon. Please, there has to be something you can do besides transferring me!”

“I empathize with you, Lena. Truly, I do. But Dean Weatherford doesn’t do bad press, regardless of whose fault it is. Once the rumor mill starts-and trust me, it will, and it will likely be Slate Tamlin who starts it-we’ll have no choice but to place the blame on someone, and that someone is you. But,” he said, pausing as he exhaled, “there may be one way we can rectify this situation without a transfer, or expulsion.”

I winced at the word expulsion, and Assistant Dean Redmon noticed. He let out his breath and rose from his chair, moving toward the window.

“You have one more final, next week. I’ll speak to your professor and have the final set up for tomorrow, or Friday, whichever is more convenient. Your GPA alone grants you a place at the Red Lakes Research Camp-”

“You can send me early?” I exclaimed, absolutely beside myself with excitement. But my excitement was quickly turned to dread as he turned from the window, shaking his head.

“The university’s relationship with the research camp is honor based, I’m afraid. They only take the most prestigious students, those who’ve earned it, with clean records. This matter with Slate Tamlin eliminates you from the program, I’m afraid.”

“But it’s not my fault,” I whispered, my voice catching in my throat as tears began to well in my eyes. Everything I had worked for during my years at Morhan evaporated before my eyes as my life seemed to splinter, then shatter around my feet.

“If I were the dean, Slate would be held accountable,” he said with conviction, looking me straight in the eye so I knew he was serious. “But I am not. Dean Weatherford ideally waves expulsion around like a cure-all, but in your case, he knows it’ll do more harm than good-’

“Because I could share my side of the story, too, and make his nephew look bad,” I noted.

“You hail from one of the most prominent areas in the west, and Dean Weatherford can’t ignore that, that is certain. He won’t want anyone from that area speaking poorly of the school. However, he can punish you in another way, Lena. And that was where the idea of transferring you to Mirage came from. But, we just received a request from a small farm in western Finaldi, outside of town called Crimson Creek. They grow valerian and wolfsbane, as well as a few other medicinal plants so vital to our hospitals. The farm is looking for help with the harvest, as it wasn’t very successful this year—a mass die-off of several fields of herbs, from what we’ve been told. But they were late with their request, and all of our senior students have already put in for other research camps-’

“So if I don’t want to transfer... I have to go to Crimson Creek?”

“Yes, Lena. If you want to graduate this December, you’ll do your field study in Crimson Creek. You’ll have your report to do at the end of the six weeks, but other than your final, you’ll be done at Morhan.”

I leaned back in my chair, looking up at the assistant dean with tears in my eyes. I had heard of Crimson Creek, and I knew it was a creepy little village no one wanted to go to. This program seemed awful....

“I don’t think this is fair, Lena. But this is the best I can do.”

“Thank you,” I said, meaning it. Had Dean Weatherford been there, I would’ve been on a boat to Mirage the next day. It might not be ideal, but at least it wasn’t expulsion or Mirage.

Assistant Dean Redmon patted my hand before he rounded his desk and sat down, pulling a thin file out of a drawer and placing it on the edge of his desk. ‘For you to take with you. It’s everything we know about the farm in Crimson Creek.’

I grabbed the file and opened it, finding a single sheet of paper with the crops they farmed listed, and nothing else. Flipping it over, I saw a photograph of a farmhouse. It looked old and dilapidated. I could see now why everyone said this place was creepy.

“This is it?” I said, unimpressed.

“That is it. But with your skills, I’m sure the students who go to Crimson Creek next year will have a lot more to work with, don’t you think?”

I slid the file into my backpack, sniffing as I rose from the chair. I gave him a weak smile, letting a few tears roll down my cheeks before I wiped them away.

“You never have to see Slate Tamlin again, alright? I will see to it personally that he leaves you alone,” he said, rising to escort me out of the room.

I nodded, knowing that would be a lost cause. Chances were high that Slate was waiting for me outside of the administrative offices right then, waiting to rub it all in my face.

He was probably hoping for an expulsion so he could pursue me without repercussions.

But as I walked out of the building and down the neat pathway leading to the student commons, the first person I saw wasn't Slate.

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Lena

Xander was standing near the fountain, mingling with a group of students. He had a wide grin on his face as he chatted with the young woman standing next to him. She was beaming up at him as if she was chatting with a celebrity. I could see her eyes shining from where I stood. I, on the other hand, was trying not to burst into tears over the fact that I was, one, being punished for Slate's disgusting behavior, and two, I wasn't going to be packing up my bags to head to Red Lakes anytime soon.

I cleared my throat and wiped the tears from my eyes as I started forward. I'd have to walk right by him to stay on the brick pathway that led through campus and into the small town of Morhan. My apartment was only three blocks away from campus, situated on top of a corner grocery store, and I was determined to get there and sob my heart out without any interference.

But Xander saw me and followed me with his gaze as I sped past his group. I knew that if I glanced over my shoulder, he would be watching me. I should probably have told him it wouldn't be necessary for him to walk me to class anymore though, eventually.

"Hey, what's the matter?"

I nearly jumped out of my skin as Xander fell in step with me.

"How'd you catch up to me so fast?" I huffed, sniffing indignantly. I did not want to talk about this at all. I would cry if I did, and I sure as hell wasn't going to start crying in front of Xander.

"I have longer legs than you," he shrugged, glancing over at me, but I refused to meet his eye. "Seriously though, have you been crying? Was it... was it Slate again? Did he touch you?"

"No!" I exclaimed, rounding on him.

We'd made it to the edge of campus and were standing under the rows of chestnut trees that lined the pathway into town. It was early evening, and most of the students were in the commons for dinner, so by some miracle, we were alone.

"Then what happened?"

Xander looked me up and down as if he didn't believe that Slate hadn't been messing with me again.

"I nearly got expelled!"

"Well... nearly is good, right? You're not actually expelled, are you?"

“No, but I..” I swallowed back the immense grief that was tying my stomach into a knot. I glanced up at him, seeing his face lined with nothing but concern. Why the hell did he care? “Slate went to the administration and said I was the one pursuing him... that I had been going to his house every night, and waiting for him to get out of class-”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah, and I just lost my spot in the Red Lakes research camp because of it.” My lower lip trembled, and I bit down on it, squeezing my eyes shut so they wouldn’t spill over with tears.

“Where is he now?” Xander asked, his voice low and deathly serious.

“I have no idea!”

“I’ll handle this, Lena, don’t worry-”

A wave of fury washed over me, temporarily blinding me from what I was really mad at. I opened my eyes, narrowing them at Xander and looking right at him through my tears. “No, you won’t! Your handling of Slate got me into this mess in the first place. If you hadn’t involved yourself-”

“Involved myself?” he growled, taking a step toward me. He glared down at me, his eyes dark slits as he continued to slowly close the distance between us, like a predator. “He had his hands on you, Lena!”

“I’m not some damsel in distress!” I cried. “I had the situation under control!”

“That’s not what it looked like to me-”

“If you hadn’t butted in and choked him, he wouldn’t have gone to the Dean about it, Xander.”

“And he would’ve continued to harass you!”

Xander and I were nearly nose to nose now, and despite the heaviness of our words, our voices were low. If anyone passed, it was likely they would only hear heated whispers, some lovers quarrel.

“Well, it doesn’t matter now, does it? I lost my spot at Red Lakes. I’m being sent to some farm out west. I worked so hard for three and a half years for... for this... and now-” I sniffled, clearing my throat and trying to get a hold of myself. Xander’s glare had abruptly changed to a look of marked concern as my tears began to flow again, and I quickly changed my countenance, giving him a death glare. “You won’t need to walk me to class anymore, Xander.”

“I-” he began, but I interrupted.

“And don’t follow me anywhere, okay? You’ve done enough damage-”

“Follow you? What? You think I’d follow you home, like Slate? Goddess, Lena, who do you think I am?”

“I don’t know you at all!” I hissed. “Three hours ago, we were strangers. And now, you’ve completely upended my life!”

“Blame this on me all you want, Lena. I wasn’t the one who went to the dean. I wasn’t the one who was stalking and harassing you. I did you a favor. I offered to protect you from him.”

“You also asked my friend Heather about me,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest.

He narrowed his eyes at me, running his tongue along his lower lip. “I did,” he replied. “I was curious about you.”

“So you took it upon yourself to swoop in and save me when I didn’t need saving? It was really heroic of you-”

“That’s enough,” he growled, straightening up to his full height. He towered over me, and I had to tilt my chin to maintain eye contact. “You don’t know me, Lena. If you’re about to say I took what happened between you and that disgusting creep as an opportunity to make myself look some type of way to you, save your breath. I saw a man taking advantage of a student, and I stepped in. I’m sorry you lost your place at Red Lakes. And, Lena, if I see Slate again, I’ll knock his teeth out, regardless of how you feel about it.”

“Then you’ll lose your field study placement too,” I argued.

He shrugged. “I haven’t put in for a field study yet. It doesn’t matter to me.”

“Well, it mattered to me,” I breathed, my breath catching in my throat. “You don’t understand.”

“I do understand. Your friend Heather laughed at me when I asked about you. Did you know that? She said you wouldn’t even look my way because you have your nose so far in your textbooks that you didn’t have a single second to spare for anything else-”

“That isn’t true-”

“Then tell me,” he interrupted, “what exactly do you care about outside of your studies?”

You didn’t seem to care that Slate, a professor at this school, was harassing you to the point of showing up at your apartment in the middle of the night and laying his hands on you in public. You were more than willing to continue to let that happen if it meant you’d get a place in the field study you wanted-”

“I’ve been doing what people tell me to do my entire life!” I cried, pushing him away. “This was all I ever wanted!”

“And you’re blaming me for it not happening?”

“I need to go,” I stammered, gripping my backpack as I walked past him. He didn’t follow me, but I could feel his gaze on my back as I hurried down the pathway toward town.

X**

“You’re joking, right?” Heather said as she set her textbook down on the coffee table. Vivienne was sitting in the chair to Heather’s left, looking shocked. Abigail was pacing back and forth behind the couch, tapping her lip.

“I’m going to kill him,” Abigail said, throwing her hands in the air.

“Which one? Slate, or Xander?” Viv sighed, crossing her legs as she slouched back into the chair.

I'd come home to an empty apartment. I stood in the center of our living room for several minutes, having to lean on the kitchen island to steady myself as I went over every minute of the day I had just had. I'd glanced up at the pieces of art my roommates and I had collected from the flea market over the years, decorating our shabby two-bedroom apartment with a mismatch of things, including plants and odd furniture that suited all our tastes at once.

I'd felt better about packing up the last three years of my life when I thought I was going to Red Lakes. Now, leaving the sanctuary of our apartment, with its exposed brick walls and kitchen we had painted a vivid teal blue, seemed impossible.

When my friends had returned from dinner on campus, they found me wrapped in a blanket on the couch, staring off into space.

And now, I was getting grilled.

"It wasn't Xander's fault," I admitted, a pang of guilt rippling through my chest as I adjusted my weight on the couch.

Heather clicked her tongue, shaking her head. "I don't agree. What are the odds he was asking me about you, and then saving you from Slate over the course of an hour?"

"I can't believe the assistant dean didn't help you, Lena," Viviene said with a sniff, reaching up to wipe a single tear from her eye. "And now they're sending you to Goddess knows where, for Goddess knows how long!"

"Crimson Creek," I sighed, closing my eyes for a moment.

"Crimson Creek? You've got to be kidding me." Abigail crossed the room, pulling on a jacket with a fur-trimmed hood.

"Where are you going?" Heather asked, her eyes narrowing in Abigail's direction.

"I'm not good for much," Abigail grunted as she pulled on her boots. "But I do have connections with a few people in town that may know a thing or two about making someone... disappear."

"Take your shoes off, Abi. I don't need anyone getting in trouble on my account." I ran my hands over my face. My skin felt raw from the tears, and I was exhausted, both mentally and physically.

I still didn't know whether I was taking my final tomorrow, or the next day, but I knew for a fact I had lost my interest in studying for it. What did it matter now, anyway? The Red Lakes research camp was off the table, and I'd be elbow-deep in soil in some far-flung town by next week.

"Maybe you should go to bed, Lena," Heather coaxed, patting my ankle. "Tomorrow could be better. You never know, the administration could... change their minds."

Vivienne nodded her agreement, but Abigail scoffed as she pulled a hat over her red curls.

"Seriously, Heather? Vivienne? Do none of you remember Carly Maddox from like, two years ago?"

"Who?" Heather asked, looking skeptical.

Abigail rolled her eyes and walked over to the couch, her high-heeled boots clicking on the wood floors. "Carly Maddox. She was a third-year climate studies student. She got assigned to Crimson Creek-

"But, the assistant dean said the farm was a new study location?" I said, sitting up against the couch cushions.

"The farm, maybe. But Crimson Creek has been a field study location for, like, decades. It's one of the oldest settlements in the west. It's downright medieval. Carly Maddox was there with a large group of students the year she disappeared. They say one night she just shifted and walked out of town, right into the barren hills.'

"Barren hills?" Heather asked, intrigued.

Abigail rolled her eyes again, grunting in annoyance as she reached for the case file sitting on the coffee table. She pulled out the picture of the farm and pointed to the background.

"See? Nothing grows there. The hills go on and on and on for miles, maybe hundreds of miles. There's not a tree or a bush in sight. Weird, right?"

"So someone went missing-" Vivienne said, trying to follow along.

"Not just anyone, Viv. Carly Maddox was linked to Dean Weatherford's son. I guess he slighted her in some way, and she complained to the administration....'

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Lena

Abigail was running her fingers through my hair, her fingers twisting my pale golden locks into a tight braid.

"I'm going to miss doing this for you," she whispered, her voice catching in her throat as she tied the end of the braid with a ribbon.

"I won't be gone forever. Just six weeks, maybe less," I replied, turning to face her. I wrapped her in an embrace, taking a deep breath as we sat on a bench on the train platform in Morhan. We'd spent the last three days packing up my meager belongings into a trunk and saying our goodbyes, which had included one last night out along the strip of bars that lined the street below our apartment.

Heather and Vivienne were back at home, studying for their finals this upcoming week and preparing for their field studies. Abigail should have been studying too, but she'd insisted on walking me to the train station.

"I'm going to Mirage for my study," she breathed, leaning against the bench with her feet propped up on the trunk. I smiled at her, arching my brow. She met my eye and smirked, rolling her eyes. "The florist who makes the arrangements for the castle asked for a student from Morhan, and I applied."

"I'm not surprised you got it," I grinned, nudging her with my elbow.

Abigail, always oozing with confidence, was mum about her studies. She came from a family of flower farmers in southern Findali, and grew up poor, but she hadn't let that stop her. She was incredibly gifted and could name a type of flower just by touching the petals, or by smell, even if she had her eyes closed. Her flower arrangements that often littered our apartment had always been insanely extravagant.

But being a florist was something most students at Morhan thumbed their noses at, often putting more stock into being a biologist or climate scientist. I often thought that chipped away at Abigail, especially with Heather, Viv, and I being her roommates.

But Abigail's creations added beauty to our mundane, textbook-filled world.

"Maybe you'll make arrangements for the Luna Queen to fawn over while she sips her afternoon tea," I teased, nudging her again.

Abigail smiled, shaking her head. "I am excited about it, you know, despite how I act.

Maybe I'll catch a glimpse of one of the princes of Poldesse. I heard they come to Mirage quite often."

I shrugged, leaning back against the bench and looking out over the train tracks.

"Or, maybe I'll see the princess. I don't think I've ever even seen a picture of her."

"Me neither," I said, twirling my braid around my finger. "I've heard she's quite reclusive."

"Well, I'll write to you about everything I see and do, I promise." Abigail patted me on the leg just as the train came into view.

"I will too," I replied, standing up and slinging a duffle bag over my shoulder. "Maybe I'll find the missing Morhan student while I'm there."

"Don't joke about that, Lena," Abigail warned, motioning for the station attendant to help us with the trunk. "And don't go out alone, okay? I'm serious."

"There will be another student from Morhan there," I said, meeting her eye as the train rolled to a stop in front of us. "I don't know who, but I'll have a partner to work with during the next couple of weeks. I won't be alone, so don't worry about me, okay?" I pulled Abigail in for one final hug, squeezing her until she dramatically pretended to gasp for air.

I waved to her as I found my seat on the train, watching as her bright, red hair faded from view as the train lurched forward.

I slumped back into my seat and watched Morhan fade from view. The rolling grasslands of western Findali sped past as I slipped in and out of sleep. It was a six-hour journey to Crimson Creek; one of the last stops on the tracks that were woven into the hilly countryside of the massive western continent. Past Crimson Creek, as far as I knew, was nothing—just barren, empty land.

My mind replayed the last three days. I'd taken my final, barely paying attention as my pencil worked across my last true assignment of my college career. I'd said my goodbyes to friends, and my beloved

roommates. I'd packed up the room I'd shared with Heather for three years, taking down the pictures I had taped to the walls.

I hadn't seen even a glimpse of Slate, or Xander, for that matter.

The past was the past. Whatever happened in Crimson Creek, well, that was my future.

Crimson Creek was exactly what Abigail had described. It was ancient, all of its buildings made of stone and its streets bumpy and incredibly narrow, paved with broken cobblestone. It was a balmy Sunday afternoon, and a small market was visible in the distance as I stood on the train platform. The town was quaint, with little more than two or three rows of stone buildings before the buildings began to scatter into the rolling, grayish hills beyond, which were dappled with some cottages and farms.

I could see a forest several miles away, however, the black, gnarled trees were just specks against the soft twilight sky.

I heard the sound of an engine approaching and turned my head, seeing a beat-up old truck bouncing over the ill-tended dirt road.

The truck stopped in front of the platform, parking right along the train tracks and turning its lights off. A figure stepped out, calling up to me.

"Are you a Morhan student?" she asked, walking up onto the platform. I nodded, taking her hand as she extended it in greeting. "I'm Bethany, one of the farmhands at the Radcliffe farm. This all you got?" she said, motioning toward the trunk and duffle bag sitting on the ground next to me. I nodded, and she arched her brow, chuckling a little as she slung the duffle bag over her shoulder. "The student that showed up yesterday had twice as much stuff as this," she smirked.

I helped her pick up the trunk and walk it across the platform and down the stairs. "I didn't know they'd gotten here before me," I murmured, slightly confused.

"They weren't supposed to. They showed up at the farm last night. We didn't even have a room set up yet. I felt kinda bad for the guy."

"Guy?" I said as we lifted the trunk into the bed of the truck. Bethany shrugged, clapping her hands together as she moved toward the driver's side door.

"Yeah, some scientist. Brought a bunch of gear with him and started bossing all of us around, wanting a sterile workplace and such."

"Great," I breathed, sliding into the passenger's seat with my duffle bag on my lap.

Bethany put the truck in gear, cursing under her breath as the truck protested before starting up again.

"Damn thing's older than my grandfather," she laughed, patting the steering wheel. "Ready?"

"Sure," I said, smiling.

Bethany was jovial, and not at all like the strange villagers Abigail had animatedly described. She smelled like soil, and green things, which sent a thrill through me. She likely knew her stuff, based on her dirt-stained fingers that were gripping the steering wheel as she steered us toward the forest.

“You’ll be out in the fields with me tomorrow, after settling in. Breakfast is at seven sharp, if you miss it, too bad. We have a valerian quota to meet by the end of the week, but it’s been a challenge.”

“How so?” I asked, glancing over at her.

She had dark curly hair that was piled messily on top of her head. She was also very petite, though likely an inch taller than me, but her voice betrayed her size. She had a whiskey voice, smooth and deep.

“Really, really bad harvest this year. This is only my second season on the farm, but compared to last year, it’s a near failure. Nothin’s growing like it should. We had to burn half the fields toward the west of the property.”

“Really?” I asked, narrowing my eyes at her.

“Yep. Some disease of the roots, we’re guessin’. Your research partner was going to test the soil today, see if he can pinpoint exactly what the problem is.”

“I’ll take a look tomorrow,” I said, leaning back against my seat. We were nearing the forest now, and Bethany glanced past me, looking out the passenger side window.

“A few rules,” she said, her voice changing significantly. I met her eye and noticed how serious she looked, which sent a chill down the length of my spine. “One; don’t go out on your own. We work in groups of two, at the minimum.”

“How many people work at the farm?”

“There’s fourteen of us-sixteen now if you count you and your partner. Two.” she tapped her fingers on the steering wheel as we crossed over a bridge and into the woods, where we were enveloped in darkness, “stay out of the woods. It’s easy to get lost.”

“No problem at all,” I murmured, feeling slightly claustrophobic as we continued to drive into the thick trees.

“And three, don’t approach the owner of the farm.”

“Who is it?” I asked, curious.

“His name is Maxwell Radcliffe. He doesn’t spend much time there. He lives in the old manor at the edge of the property, near the forest. He’s standoffish and serious about the prosperity of the farm. If you have any issues, you talk to me or Henry directly, okay? Henry’s been working for the Radcliffe family since Maxwell was a kid. He knows everything about the property.”

I was now exceedingly curious about this Maxwell Radcliffe fellow, but I didn’t have a chance to press Bethany about it. We broke through the tree line, approaching a massive wrought-iron gate flanked by a crumbling stone half-wall. I leaned forward in surprise.

“This... doesn’t look like a farm?” I said, glancing at Bethany as the gate began to slowly swing open.

“It used to be an Alpha’s estate, way back in the day. I think it was built like, two hundred years ago? I might be wrong. Henry will know for sure if you want to ask him. There’s several of these estates dotted

around the west, but most of them are in disrepair. Not Radcliffe manor, though. The man himself still lives in the house. It'll be up on the left in a few minutes."

We drove up and over a few shallow hills, following a paved road through long, open fields of what looked like grain. In the distance I could see a group of small buildings, the yellow light from their windows sending funnels of gold through the darkness as we neared.

"That's the barn, and those are the cottages the workers live in. There's a warehouse for the equipment behind the barn, but it's hard to see from the road." Bethany pointed in the opposite direction. "And that is Radcliffe manor."

Bethany turned the truck to the right, pointing us in the direction of the cottages, but I turned to look out the rear window of the truck at the massive house sitting at the top of one of the hills. It was barely visible through a thicket of gnarled trees, and a blanket of fog covered the ground surrounding the remainder of the road leading up to it. A single light was on high in one of the two towers that overlooked the property.

I hadn't been expecting that. I'd been expecting windmills, white-washed houses and scorched earth, not a sprawling mansion and a property that had to have been three times the size of Morhan's campus.

Bethany parked the truck in front of one of the cottages, which was one of three identical stone buildings arranged in a semi-circle around what looked like a fire pit.

"There's a bunk house down that path that has a kitchen and library in it. That's where we hang out when we're not out in the fields. But it's full because of the harvest, so you'll be staying in the middle cabin. Mine is the cabin to the left, and Henry lives on the right. It has a bathroom, and a small kitchenette if you want to make yourself some tea or coffee, but that's it."

I nodded, slinging my duffle bag over my shoulder as I stepped out of the truck and shut the door. I helped Bethany with the trunk, and together we carried it over to the cabin and up the steps to the narrow, covered porch. There was a light on inside, and I saw a shadow move through the light peeking out from under the front door. Before I could say a word, the door swung open.

And a familiar form stepped out.

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 504

Lena

I stifled my shock at seeing Xander step out onto the porch. He silently picked up the trunk as though it were weightless and turned back into the tiny cottage.

"You'll have to share the space for a few weeks until the seasonal workers start to go back to town," Bethany said, totally unperturbed by the idea of a man and a woman sharing an incredibly small space together. It was wholly inappropriate, but what was I supposed to say? She'd already mentioned the bunkhouse was full.

I didn't meet Xander's eye as I stepped inside, looking over my shoulder as Bethany stepped off the porch. "Breakfast at seven, okay? Don't miss it!" she said before she turned to walk toward her own cottage. I sucked in my breath and turned on my heel, shutting the door behind me.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I hissed, dropping my duffle bag onto the single, high-backed chair that was sitting against the wall next to a rusted wood stove. Xander was leaning against the opposite wall, a smirk on his face. I wanted to slap it off of him.

“It was the only placement left.”

“You knew I was coming here-”

“I took it because I knew you’d be here, yes. I felt bad about how I handled Slate, and I wanted to make it up to you.”

I gaped at him, then snapped my mouth shut, narrowing my eyes at him.

“There’s only one bed, by the way,” he shrugged, arching his brow.

“I guess you’ll have to sleep on the porch!”

“No, I won’t be sleeping on the porch,” he said with a wry smile.

I sucked on my lower lip, trying to find an immediate solution. “I’ll sleep on the floor then, out here.” I started to open my duffle bag, which was stuffed full of my clothes. All of my books and equipment were in the trunk that Xander was now sitting on. “Do you mind?” I said, motioning to my trunk.

“I sleep on the left side of the bed, closest to the door. You’ll sleep on the right side,” he said casually, running his hands down the length of his thighs to brush out the wrinkles in his jeans.

“If you think I’m sharing a bed with you, you’re delusional,” I laughed, shaking my head and fishing a thick sweater from my duffle bag. Even with the wood stove going, it was absolutely freezing in the cottage. I couldn’t believe anything grew in such weather.

“Cold?” he asked as I pulled the sweater over my head. I glared at him as I pulled my arms through the sleeves. “It’ll be even colder on the floor tonight, you know. Well be much warmer under a quilt, sharing each others’ heat-”

“If you lay a single finger on me, I’ll kill you.”

He raised his hands, chuckling as he shook his head. “I’m not a monster, Lena. There’s plenty of room, and extra blankets. You can have your own. I bet I can find a few sleeping bags, too. That way... we couldn’t touch each other, you know, being zipped up in our bags... even if we wanted to.”

I could feel the heat rising in my cheeks as he looked into my eyes. Something about the way he was looking at me sent a warm rush down the length of my spine. I didn’t like the way my stomach did a little flip when he’d said “even if we wanted to,” like it had been some kind of challenge.

He rose from the trunk, tucking his hands in the pockets of the jeans.

“I’m going to the bunkhouse to grab something to eat before I go to bed. Do you want anything?” His countenance had changed, and he was no longer giving me a teasing look as he spoke. His voice had been soft, almost caring. It caught me off guard.

“No, thanks,” I whispered, tucking a rogue lock of hair behind my ear.

“The bathroom is through this door, and this is the bedroom,” he said, reaching out to touch both doors. The cottage was small enough that it was almost uncomfortably tight with two people standing in the main room. “There’s tea in the cabinet, and the kettle on the woodstove has hot water in it, if you want a cup.”

“Bethany said there was a kitchenette?” I murmured, glancing at the cabinets on the far wall. There was no refrigerator, stove, or sink.

“Yeah, she lied,” he laughed, leaning down to tie the laces of his shoes. “But there are fresh towels in the bathroom if you want to take a shower. It does take a while for the water to heat up, though.”

“Okay, thanks.”

He looked me up and down before straightening to his full height. “I’ll be right back, okay? Don’t lock me out.”

I glanced down at the floor, trying to hide the smile that touched my lips as he moved across the room and then disappeared through the door. It shut behind him, and I found myself alone.

I opened the door to the bathroom, finding it to be well-sized despite the tightness of the cottage in general. I turned on the water in the shower, which was frigid, just like Xander had said it would be. I walked back out to the main room, put a log in the woodstove, and poured myself a cup of tea while I waited for the shower to heat up, holding the mug in my hands for a moment while I glanced around the room.

I decided not to look in the bedroom-not yet, at least. I’d cross that bridge when it was time to accept the fact that if I wanted to sleep at all during the next couple of weeks, it was going to have to be next to Xander.

I showered, letting my journey to Crimson Creek wash down the drain. By the time I stepped back out into the main room, dressed in thick thermal leggings and a matching sweatshirt, Xander had returned. He rose from the armchair, offering it to me.

“You should sit by the fire so your hair dries before we go to bed,” he said, and I narrowed my eyes at him.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re exceedingly bossy?”

“Yes,” he said, matter-of-factly, but he gave me a teasing grin as he returned to his prior perch atop my trunk. I refilled my mug of tea and sat down next to the fire, exhaling deeply. I could feel fatigue setting into my bones, but I knew the second I surrendered to it, I would have to curl up next to the man staring at me from across the room.

I crossed my legs, staring right back at him.

“Did Bethany tell you about the issues they’re having with the crops?” he asked, biting into an apple.

I nodded, sipping my tea. “She said they had to burn some acreage-’

"I tested the soil today. I have an area set up in the warehouse with a makeshift lab, if you ever need to use it. It's interesting, Lena. The soil was abnormal, but all of the tests I ran came back inconclusive for disease."

"I'll look at your findings tomorrow morning, after breakfast."

He nodded, staring down at his apple for a moment.

"You know, I don't actually know what you study," I said, bringing my tea to my lips. "How are we supposed to work together, exactly?"

I felt a rush of heat prickle across my face as I took a sip of my tea. He was staring at me, watching me take a drink, his eyes lingering on my mouth before he met my eyes with an intense stare. I felt suddenly lightheaded, and took another, deeper sip, hoping to wash the unusual feelings away.

"I'm a chemistry major," he said quickly, standing up and tossing his apple into a wastebasket. "I'm your lab, essentially." He glanced down at his watch, then looked at me. "I'm going to bed; it's late. I don't want to miss breakfast."

I sighed, rising from the chair with my empty mug in my hands. He walked into the bedroom, but I walked past him into the bathroom to rinse out my mug and brush my teeth. I could hear him in the bedroom. He was unzipping something, then the sound of clothing hitting the floor overwhelmed the sound of the water running in the sink. The bathroom door was open, and through the mirror, I could just see a glimpse of him standing shirtless in the bedroom.

I should have looked away, but I didn't. He looked through the bedroom door and met my eyes. I blushed deeply, quickly looking away from him as I rinsed my mouth out and hurriedly splashed cool water on my face.

Xander had, in fact, found a set of sleeping bags and had laid them out over the bed. I gingerly stepped into the room, which didn't have much space for anything but our bags of clothes and a full-sized bed, which was pushed up against the wall. If I wanted to get out of bed, I'd have to crawl to the end, or over Xander.

"You first," he said, motioning to the sleeping bag closest to the wall. I swallowed, not meeting his eye as I climbed over the bed and quickly cocooned myself in the bright green sleeping bag, zipping it up all the way so only my eyes were visible. I scooted up against the wall, trying to give him as much space as possible so we wouldn't inadvertently touch in the middle of the night. He left the room and turned all of the lights off. I heard him turn the lock in place on the front door.

He returned to the bedroom and glanced down at me as he lingered by the door. He was still shirtless, his skin glistening in the soft light coming through the single window on the far wall. "Do you want the bedroom door open or closed?" he asked, his hand on the doorknob.

"Um, open," I murmured, unable to tear my eyes away from his. He left the door, maintaining eye contact with me as he walked to the bed, his hands unbuttoning his jeans. "What are you doing? Are you taking off your pants?"

“Who sleeps in jeans, Lena? You can watch me undress, if that’s what you’re into.” He winked at me, but I quickly shut my eyes, exhaling as I heard his jeans hit the ground and felt the bed move beneath his weight as he climbed into his sleeping bag.

“You’re sleeping naked? No-”

“I have boxers on. Chill,” he grumbled, trying to make himself comfortable. Despite being pressed up against the wall, I was still touching Xander. “They could’ve fit a queen size bed in here if they tried,” he said, turning to look at me. I peeked at him through the opening of my sleeping bag. “You’re going to sweat to death in there, Lena, wearing thermals. These bags are rated for negative sixty-degree weather.”

“I’m NOT sleeping next to you in only my underwear,” I glowered, rolling over to face the wall. He sighed, chuckling to himself before facing away from me.

As I waited for sleep to take me, my mind began to wander. I realized that most of the women who attended Morhan would’ve killed to be in my position. I was sharing a bed with Xander Smith. I was inches away from him. I could reach over and run my fingertips over his chest if I wanted to.

And he’d probably let me.

I squeezed my eyes shut, praying to the Goddess to let me get just a glimpse of rest.

But I didn’t sleep long. Sometime in the middle of the night, I awake to Xander getting out of bed. He darted toward the window, his hands on either side of it as he peered outside.

“What is it?” I whispered, running my hands over my face.

Xander had been right. I was suffocating in the sleeping bag and my thermals were sticking to my heated body.

He didn’t reply. The muscles in his back were totally rigid as he continued to stare out the window. I felt a ripple of unease as I slowly sat up, leaning on my elbow as I watched him. “Xander, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Go back to sleep.”

I narrowed my eyes at his back and reached down to unzip my sleeping bag but he was suddenly moving, pulling on a shirt as he walked out of the room. I heard the front door unlock then slam shut behind him as he walked out on the porch.

I lay back down, staring at the ceiling as I waited, and waited, for him to return and tell me what the hell was going on.

Sold as the Alpha King’s Breeder Chapter 505

◆Xander*

I’m not sure what I saw looking in our window. Every single hair on my arms was standing on end as I stood on the porch, squinting into the pitch-black night. A soft breeze was rustling the grain in the distance. It was overcast. The entire area was bathed in nothing but blackness.

I’d seen eyes. I knew that much. And they had been looking past me, trying to catch a glimpse of Lena.

I leaned on the railing, gripping it so tightly the muscles of my arms flexed with tension. I looked down the pathway toward the bunkhouse, narrowing my eyes at the single light that was on inside.

Had some creep snuck out of the bunkhouse and peered into our window, not expecting me to be awake?

I hardly ever slept. Not deeply, at least. I'd spent the last four hours listening to Lena's labored breathing as she suffocated herself in her sleeping bag. I'd finally reached over and unzipped it, just enough for the skin of her neck to be exposed to the cool air in the room.

And when I'd turned back around, I'd seen it. Two eyes looking right at US through the window. Had they been glowing? Or was it only the fact I'd been on the edge of sleep that made them look that way?

I looked back over the open field once more, glaring into the night.

"She's mine," I whispered, hoping whatever or whoever it was that was lingering nearby was close enough to hear me.

I locked the door on my way in and opened every cabinet, looking for something to cover the window with. I found a hammer, but no nails or tacks. That didn't matter to me. I searched around the room and settled on the wobbly side table next to the armchair and broke one of the legs off of it, pulling out two nails and closing them in my fist.

"What the hell are you doing?" Lena was standing in the doorway of the bedroom, now dressed in an oversized tee shirt. Her legs and feet were bare, which sent a thrill through me as I rose to my full height.

"I told you, you were going to get too hot."

She ignored me, crossing her hands over her chest and stepping out of my way as I sidestepped around her to get back into the bedroom.

"Why did you break that table?"

"I needed nails."

"For what? Why were you outside?"

"It's the middle of the night, Lena. Stop asking me so many questions," I murmured, holding the nails between my teeth as I measured the width of the window with my hands. I looked around the room, settling my gaze on the pillow I'd been using only minutes before. "Hand me that pillowcase."

"Why?"

"We need a curtain. Just do it."

She gave me a skeptical look, but to my surprise she followed my directions, sliding the pillowcase off the thin, useless pillow and handing it to me. I held it against the wall and drove one of the nails

through it, and then again on the other side of the window, so the pillowcase covered the window entirely.

“Why couldn’t you have just asked for curtains in the morning?”

“Well, technically it is morning, and no one is awake yet,” I replied, gripping the hammer as I turned to face her. I glanced down at it, deciding it would be best to sleep with it, or at least have it nearby in case whoever was looking in our window decided to do anything they would likely come to regret. “Go back to sleep, okay?”

“Fine,” she whispered.

I could hear the exhaustion in her voice. I waited for her to climb back into her sleeping bag before I sat on the edge of my bed myself, sliding the hammer under the bed but still within reach.

“Was there something out there?” she asked, her voice timid enough for me to turn to look down at her, noticing the apprehension in her eyes. She was frightened.

“Why? Are you scared?”

“Don’t mess with me, Xander.”

I smiled at her, reaching over to pat her shoulder. She flinched away from me, glaring before she turned to face the wall again.

I laid back down, sighing deeply with my hands resting on my chest. I couldn’t find the nerve to close them, not after what I’d seen. I’d be up all night.

And that was okay. I could just lay there and rest, taking long, slow breaths, and still feel well tomorrow. I could nap, perhaps, knowing Lena would be in the company of others. Unless, of course, whoever had been peering in our window had been a worker themselves.

An hour later I found it hard to keep my eyes open. I finally surrendered to sleep, and the last thing I envisioned were Lena’s pale gray eyes narrowing in my direction like they had many, many times before.

I didn’t like this place. I didn’t like the feeling it gave me, like I was being watched, preyed upon by some unseen force.

I’d keep Lena safe, whether she liked it or not... whether she liked me, or not.

◆Lena*

I’d met a few of the other people working at Radcliffe farm over breakfast in the bunkhouse, which was a small square shaped building with two long bedrooms housing several cots, lined up in rows.

There was a full kitchen, dining room, and sitting area with several bookshelves stocked with books from nearly every genre available. I found that comforting as I sat in the dining room, picking at my plate of bacon and eggs while everyone else chatted amiably over mugs of coffee and plates heaped with breakfast.

Xander was seated at the end of the table, eyeing everyone suspiciously. He looked rather menacing as I peered at him over the rim of my coffee mug. I raised my brow at him as he met my eye, and he softened his expression, sighing as he looked back at his plate.

I didn't know what his deal was last night, but he was still acting super weird. But I didn't know him that well, so maybe this wasn't weird for him. Maybe he always acted like this.

"Alright, let's get going. Who's on the dishes today?" Bethany said, which was met with collaborated murmuring. An unfamiliar woman stepped forward, her soft brown hair pulled back into a tight ponytail as she began to gather the dishes. I rose, drinking the last of my coffee, and caught her meeting Xander's gaze. He gave her a wry smile, and she blushed, fluttering her eyelashes at him.

I rolled my eyes, setting my coffee cup down and turning toward the door, where Bethany was waiting for me.

"Ready to go see what we're dealing with?" she said, holding the door open for me as I stepped out onto the porch.

A few minutes later, we were walking along a well-beaten path through the fields of grain, most of which had gone to seed. We were heading toward the section of the farm that was in the southwest corner of the property, where their most valuable crops were grown.

Valerian root, wolfsbane, hummingbird sage, and thyme. I could see the patches of herbs as we crested a shallow hill, their perky green leaves rustling in the gentle breeze. But I saw something else, something that I'd never seen before.

"What are those dark patches on the other side of the fence?" I asked as we walked down the hill. Bethany glanced over at me, a look of concern flashing through her eyes.

"We don't know."

"Is it a plant?" I asked. I couldn't tell by how far we were from the spots that dappled the landscape outside of the property line. It could have been burn marks from lightning, for all I knew.

"Henry can tell you more about it than I can," she answered, shrugging her shoulders. "That's him, actually--"

She had a walkie-talkie on her hip, and it crackled with static, someone's voice coming through the speaker. She motioned me forward, pointing to the old man who was crouched in the herb garden, his back to me.

I glanced at her over my shoulder as I approached Henry, noticing the look of concern on her face as she turned from US and began to walk back up the hill. I looked to the left, seeing the manor in the distance, but from a new angle. It was even bigger than I'd thought the night before.

"It's not much to look at, honestly," Henry said, his back still turned to me. I stopped walking, standing ten or so yards away from him. "The house, I mean. It's falling to pieces like the rest of 'em." Henry rose, wiping his hands off on his pants as he turned to me, nodding in greeting.

But he paused, then looked me up and down, narrowing his eyes. I bit the inside of my cheek as I tucked a lock of hair behind my ear.

"I'm Lena," I said, giving him my best smile.

He continued to stare at me, then arched his brow, shaking his head as he turned back to the herbs. "Sure you are," he said. I pursed my lips and walked forward, gingerly stepping between the herbs as I made my way closer to Henry. He had a basket next to him filled with several bushels of sage and a few large valerian roots. "So, you're a botanist, then?"

"I will be, officially, when I graduate in December."

Henry glanced up at me, grunting in response. I colored, then knelt down beside him.

"Bethany said you were having issues with the harvest--"

"An infestation," he butted in, cutting me off. I opened my mouth to respond, but he stood, handing me his basket and pointing to the valerian roots. "They're supposed to look like that," he said, then opened his palm, showing me the valerian roots in his hand, "not this."

I peered down into his hand, seeing the spindly roots blackened and withered. I looked up at him, thoroughly confused. "My partner said he tested the soil yesterday--"

"It's not the soil," he breathed, shaking his head.

"But--"

"You must be Lena," said a rich voice behind me. I spun around, surprised beyond belief by the man standing only a few feet away from us. Henry bobbed his head at the man, then knelt once more, quietly going back to tending the herbs.

The man was... beautiful. I found myself locking eyes with him, unable to look away as he slowly nodded his head at me in greeting. He was likely in his late thirties, or early forties, with dark brown hair and thick sideburns streaked with gray. He was clean shaven, his jaw wide and tight as his lips stretched into a welcoming, but seductive, smile. But his eyes were strange. They were a very light brown, but they seemed to reflect a deep gold in the sun. I found myself unable to break away from his gaze for a moment.

But then I saw movement coming down the hill behind him. Xander.

Xander stopped, balancing a large plastic tote with all of my research equipment in his hands as he looked down at me and the mysterious stranger. He narrowed his eyes, and I recognized his expression immediately. He had looked at Slate that way.

Oh, no.

"You must be Maxwell Radcliffe," I said as loudly as possible without screaming it, standing to my full height and hoping Xander had heard me.

Maxwell smiled, tilting his head as he looked me over. "It's lovely to meet you, Lena.

Truly a pleasure." He spoke like an aristocrat from a romance novel. He kind of dressed like it, too, and he looked out of place standing in the middle of the field, surrounded by dirt and plants. He followed my nervous gaze, looking over his shoulder at Xander, but then he turned back to me, a smirk dancing across his face. "I'll leave you to it. But I'd love to have you at the manor for dinner sometime, to discuss the farm, the history, things of that nature."

All I could do was nod. Xander was staring at Maxwell so intensely that it made my skin prickle with adrenaline. What the hell was Xander's problem?

Maxwell turned on his heel, bobbing his head in greeting to Xander as he walked up the hill with his arms tucked behind his back.

What an odd man.

Xander followed him with his gaze, not even bothering to give the owner of the expansive property a smile, or a blank expression. He was glaring.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I choked out as Xander walked up to me.

He dropped the tote on the ground at my feet, leaning toward me to whisper hoarsely into my ear. 'Stay away from him,' he hissed.

I poked him in the chest, pushing against him with my finger to put some distance between us. 'You have absolutely no say in what I do, Xander. Don't ruin this for me!'

"Ruin your dinner party with that old creep?" he laughed, narrowing his eyes into slits.

"He's not old. Goddess, Xander. I don't understand you at all-"

"I don't like the way he looked at you, Lena."

"I don't care what you think, or what you want. I need this field study to graduate. You cannot, and will not, mess this up for me again." I snatched the tote off the ground and turned my back to him, stalking back over to Henry, who had been watching us with interest.

Xander stalked off, going Goddess knows where, but I didn't care. I knelt beside Henry, taking a deep breath before turning to face him. Henry peered at me, my argument with Xander seemingly softening his countenance.

"What were you saying about the valerian roots?" I huffed, tucking my hair behind my ears.

Henry shrugged, motioning toward my tote.

"Well, princess, what do you want to know?"

My blood ran cold. What did he just call me?

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 506

Lena

I spent a good part of the day working in silence next to Henry as we crouched in the rows of medicinal herbs. He would hand me things on occasion, wordlessly, for me to inspect. By midday, I had a basket full of oddly shaped valerian roots and several bushes of hummingbird sage that were withered and drooping, obviously diseased.

But none of it made sense. Their soil was rich, and the positioning of the garden and the amount of sun the area received were perfect growing conditions for the herbs. I wondered at first whether the chill of

the night was causing the damage, but Henry waved this away, shaking his head as he rose and peered into the distance, over the crumbling, ancient stone wall that wrapped around the entire estate.

“Are those lightning strikes?” I asked, standing next to him as I pointed.

He grunted in response. He was a man of few words, a lot like my own grandfather. “No.’

“Then... what is it? Those black spots all over-”

“It’s plants.’

“Plants? What-”

“You’ll find them everywhere now. They started in the southern tip of Finaldi and migrated north over the years. About three years ago, we started seeing them in Crimson Creek. We call it blood root.”

“Blood root?”

He nodded but then turned away from me, continuing to forage. I balanced my basket on my hip as I watched him. He was ignoring me. He likely knew I wanted to know more about the mystery beyond the wall.

“I don’t need your assistance any longer today,” he said, keeping his back to me. I narrowed my eyes at him, then turned back to the path leading back to the barn and bunkhouse.

I stopped at the little shed in the corner of the herb garden and stored the tote of supplies Xander had brought down for me earlier in the day. It had been a kind gesture on his part, but it had been marred by his behavior toward Maxwell Radcliffe.

I sighed, glancing at Henry over my shoulder before stepping through the herb garden’s gate. Bethany said Henry had been working for the Radcliffe family for at least three decades. He knew everything about this place.

And I was willing to bet he wasn’t telling me about the strange black plants called blood root on purpose.

**★

The rain started as I walked back toward the bunkhouse. I wasn’t dressed for the rain, but to be honest, the weather here was very strange given the time of year. It was late autumn, and the air was warm during the day, but the nights were frigid and uncomfortable. Morhan was north of Crimson Creek... and it wasn’t nearly as cold there.

I was heading to the warehouse with my samples to give to Xander so he could run his tests. I shielded my face with my hand as I walked past the barn, where the sound of giggling cut through the rain.

I paused, turning my head toward the barn where the giggling continued, interrupted by a man’s voice... Xander’s voice.

I shifted the weight of my basket and crept toward the bam, peering inside the door, which was slightly ajar. I could just see the outline of someone leaning against one of the horse stalls.

The rain was beginning to pelt the top of my head, cold and slightly painful. I stepped inside the barn, blinking as my eyes adjusted to the dim light.

Xander was whispering into the ear of the brown-haired woman who had been collecting dishes at breakfast, giving her a seductive smile as she giggled like a schoolgirl.

But then they saw me. and Xander immediately leaned away from her. straightening to his full height as he pushed off the stall.

“What are you doing here?” he asked harshly.

The woman blushed, glancing at me before turning on her heel and walking past me out of the barn.

“I could ask you the same thing,” I said, tilting my head in the direction the woman had retreated.

“You’re supposed to be working.”

“I was.” He grabbed a shovel that was leaning next to him and turned, taking a step into the stall.

“What are you doing?”

“Working-”

“Mucking the stall? That’s not what you’re supposed to-”

“You spent hours in the herb garden collecting samples, Lena. I didn’t have anything to run my tests on, yet,” he said from the stall. I couldn’t see him, but I could hear the annoyance in his voice.

“Are you doing that woman’s job?” I asked, taking a step forward.

He didn’t answer for a moment, then I heard him let out his breath. He turned to me, his eyes seeming to glow in the darkness of the stall. “Her name is Jen, and yeah, I am.”

“It seemed like you two were doing a lot more than chores-”

Xander came out of the stall, his eyes blazing with annoyance. He set the shovel down as he took several steps in my direction, narrowing his eyes at me.

“What’s it to you?” he asked, leaning down so close to my face our noses were nearly touching, “Are you jealous?”

“I’m not jealous,” I sneered, attempting to push him away.

He stood his ground, however, his eyes flashing with a silent challenge.

“How would you have felt if you’d seen me kissing her?” he asked, his voice an octave lower than usual.

I didn’t like the way his words made me feel. “Well, were you kissing her?” I whispered, unsure of why the words even left my mouth.

He gave me a sly smile, leaning even closer and closing the distance between us. His mouth hovered over mine for a split second.

But he didn’t kiss me. He straightened up, a smug look on his face as he chuckled to himself, shaking his head.

“You think you know what you want, Lena. You really have no idea.”

“What the hell do you mean by that?” I sneered, stifling the heated blush that was rippling over my cheeks and neck.

“You wanted me to kiss you, just then. I could feel it. You’re disappointed that I didn’t-”

“Shut up, Xander,” I huffed, pushing past him to walk back out into the rain.

He said nothing further as I gathered my basket in my arms and trudged into the bleak downpour, not even bothering to shield myself from the rain as it washed over my face and cooled my burning skin.

I set the basket in the warehouse, noticing Xander’s workstation in the corner. He’d covered it in a sheet of plastic to keep the area free of dust and other particles while it wasn’t in use, which was smart. I still thought he was a jerk; he was a bossy, oppressive playboy, but at least he knew what he was doing in terms of our field study.

“Hey,” Bethany said as I set the basket down, bobbing her head at me as she pulled herself out from underneath one of the tractors, her body splayed on a creeper seat. She sat up, wiping her brow which left a smudge of blackened grease behind.

“Hey,” I said shortly, opening the cabinet where Xander was keeping our field study file.

“What’s the matter with you?” Bethany laughed. “Henry wear you down? He’s good at what he does, but man, he’s the grumpiest old man I’ve ever met.”

“You’ve never met my grandfather, then,” I murmured, opening the file and staring down at it, running my finger along the index.

“Anything I can help you with? This rain put a damper on the outside tasks,” Bethany stood and wiped her grimy hands on a rag, dropping a few tools into a large toolbox sitting next to the truck.

“Maybe find me a new place to sleep,” I breathed, glancing up from the file to meet her gaze. She smirked, shaking her head.

“Don’t want to share a room with your partner, huh?”

“I really don’t,” I tried to smile, but it was impossible. Xander was starting to make me feel... something. Whatever it was, was foreign, and I didn’t like it. I wasn’t a jealous person by nature, but finding him in the barn with that Jen girl made me feel... awful. There was no other way to describe it.

“I bet I could get Jen to move to the cottage and give you her bunk,” Bethany said as she closed up her toolbox. “She’s been talking about Xander since he got here over the weekend. A little obsessed if-”

“No, it’s alright. I’ll manage,” I said quickly, swallowing against the sudden panic tightening my throat. Bethany gave me a side-eyed look, then shrugged, lifting the toolbox as though it weighed nothing and setting it on a shelf.

“Suit yourself. Hey, listen, we’re having a bonfire tonight, down by the edge of the property. There’s a break in the wall where you can look out over the hills and it’s supposed to be clear. One of the seasonal

workers is big into astrology. She'll tell you your fortune based on the stars, if you're interested. She reads palms, too."

I gave Bethany an identical look of skepticism, and she laughed.

"We'll have beer and wine, I promise."

"I guess." I smiled, but then the thought of seeing Xander and Jen together again sent an ache through my heart. What the hell was wrong with me?

"Want to go hang out in the bunkhouse? Or do you have some more work to do?" Bethany was pulling on a rain jacket, tilting her head toward the door of the warehouse.

"I could use a cup of tea," I agreed, following her out into the rain. I tucked the file under my sweater, shielding it from the downpour as we walked down the sodden pathway to the bunkhouse, where I was delighted to see a plume of smoke rising out of the chimney.

It was warm inside the bunkhouse with its ancient hearth crackling with several split logs burning high. Bethany took me into the kitchen, which was incredibly modern compared to the rest of the narrow, stone building. She put a kettle on to boil and pulled down a huge basket of assorted tea, as well as a jar of honey and fresh milk.

"So, tell me about what Henry talked to you about today," she said as she poured hot water into our mugs.

I shrugged, stirring in a spoonful of honey and dropping my tea bag into my mug. "He didn't say much at all just gave me judgmental looks. He did mention... blood root."

"Did he tell you anything about it?"

"No, not at all. What is it, exactly?"

"We don't really know. It was tested a few years ago, by a Morhan student, actually.

But, no one ever got back to the Alpha of Crimson Creek about the results-'

"Who tested it?" I said hurriedly, setting my mug down on the counter. Bethany peered at me for a moment, then shrugged, sipping her tea.

"Some girl, Charlie? I think-"

"Carly Maddox?" I whispered, more to myself than anything.

"Sure, maybe. I hadn't come here to work yet. Wouldn't you already know what it is since Morhan would have the results?"

I shook my head, glancing at the file I had set on the counter. There was no mention of blood root in the file about Radcliffe farm at all, nor about the plant in Crimson Creek.

In fact, there was no mention of another group of students ever having been in the area. Abigail had heard about Carly Maddox through rumors that circulated around campus when she failed to return

from her field study three years ago, but there was no official report, or even a brief mention, of her name in the file I'd been given.

Something wasn't adding up here.

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 507

◆Lena*

I'd had at least three cups of cheap wine already. It tasted awful and had likely been made on the farm, but it didn't matter. The alcohol was warming me from the inside out as I sat on a fallen log near the fire, staring into the embers with my plastic cup of wine clasped in one hand, and my other clutching my knee.

Xander was on the other side of the fire, Jen whispering and giggling into his ear.

I don't know why I was so angry about it, but I was. I couldn't deny it as I took a long drink from the garbage wine, crumpling my empty cup before throwing it into the fire.

"Three cups is not enough to get you drunk," said someone to my left. I looked up as Bethany approached with an unfamiliar woman who took a seat next to me. She smiled, her bouncy auburn curls falling around her face as she handed me a bottle of wine. "This stuff is way better!"

"I probably shouldn't," I smiled, but I ended up taking a swig of the wine right out of the bottle when I saw Xander kiss Jen's cheek from across the fire.

"Holden makes the hooch, you know. That's what he calls it. It's just fermented peaches. This batch was pretty weak, but the bottle is real wine, a gift from the boss man," the unfamiliar woman grinned, taking the bottle back and bringing it back to her lips. "I'm Elaine, by the way."

"Lena," I said, wiping my mouth on the back of my sleeve.

"You have beautiful hair," she said admiringly as Bethany tossed a few more logs into the fire. "Is it naturally that light?"

"Yeah, kind of. I get lowlights every once in a while," I said as I touched one of the pale golden pieces falling loose around my face.

"Elaine is the one I was telling you about, Lena. She can read palms."

"Tea leaves, too," Elaine added, pointing a finger at Bethany. "But Beth won't let me read anything for her!"

"I'd rather not know my fate. That's between me and the Moon Goddess," Bethany grinned, pointing a finger in the air, and then blowing a kiss toward the stars.

I couldn't help but laugh, which was a nice break from the glowering I had been doing all evening.

"Do you want me to read yours?" Elaine asked, her eyes a strange scarlet color as they reflected off the fire. I hesitated, then shrugged, loosened up by the wine as I opened my palm toward her. "Ah, your hands are smoother than I expected," she said, running her fingertips over the palm of my hand before

tracing the lines of my palm. I expected her to say something immediately, to make up some grand story. I didn't quite believe she could actually do it.

But she stared down at my palm for what felt like ages, her expression fixed in a scowl. Bethany noticed, and moved in on US, squatting down to peer at my hand.

"What do you see?"

"It's very odd," Elaine mumbled, not breaking her gaze from the fine lines of my palm. "Your lifeline... It's not here."

"Well, I'm not dead, am I?"

"I mean, you're technically in hell, if you think about it. There's no place worse than Crimson Creek," Bethany deadpanned, but then we both broke into a fit of giggles.

Elaine remained serious though, her eyes on my palm. I felt a wave of unease wash over me, wondering what she saw, or thought she saw. I felt my hand go rigid, my fingers threatening to curl, but it was too late.

"Your love line... Is fractured several times. Here, and here, and here.... But it's still interconnected by these faint lines, do you see?"

"What does it mean?" I asked, a little breathless.

"It means you'll have one great love, but something separates you at least twice, then..." she traced the very edge of my palm, which was flawless. "Then it just ends, turns to nothing. I've never seen anything like this before."

I felt a sudden overwhelming, unexplainable grief.

"Is it her mate?" Bethany asked.

"There's no mate line that I can see," Elaine said softly, shaking her head. "I am totally perplexed. But, you do work with your hands a lot, Lena. I could be misinterpreting it.."

I closed my palm as Elaine straightened up and accepted the bottle of wine Bethany was handing to her.

"What does it mean when the love line just... disappears?" I asked. Elaine took a swig of wine, then exhaled, swallowing it back.

"I don't know. Usually, it's an abrupt end, meaning a death, or an end of the relationship. Yours isn't like that, though. It's very faint, then comes back a little deeper toward the end before fading completely. It's

almost like... they go, or you go somewhere together. Like, you're not here? Does that make sense?"

Bethany and I looked at each other, then began to laugh, the effects of the bottle of red wine taking hold.

"No!" I said, wiping tears of mirth from my eyes as I accepted the wine from Elaine, who gave me a nervous smile.

"I'm sure I'm interpreting it incorrectly. My grandmother taught me, but she wasn't very good at it."

"Makes a neat party trick." Bethany said, sitting down on the other side of me. "You should read her tea leaves next."

"I would, but we don't have any more loose tea at the bunkhouse," Elaine replied.

I opened my mouth to speak but was interrupted by a squeal on the other side of the fire. Jen had her arms wrapped around Xander's neck, and he was nibbling on her earlobe.

All of a sudden the wine wasn't sitting well. I stood, a bit lightheaded as I stepped over the log.

"I'm going to walk around for a minute," I said to Bethany and Elaine, who nodded. I crossed my arms over my chest as I walked away from the fire, smiling amiably as I passed a group of farm workers who were mingling in a small group, then began to walk toward the break in the wall.

It was a beautiful night. The stars were shining brightly across the hills. I found myself looking for those little black spots, but saw none as I walked a little way down the length of the stone wall, toward the edge of the dark forest.

I knew I shouldn't go into the forest. Every fiber of my being was telling me to stop. So, I leaned against the wall after giving myself several hundred yards of space from the bonfire, and those congregating on the outskirts of the party. I watched them for a minute, closing my eyes against the faint sounds of their voices as I took a deep breath.

"What the hell are you doing out here by yourself?"

I opened my eyes to Xander, looking menacing as he stalked toward me. I puffed out my chest and turned away from him, but he grabbed me by the shoulder and whirled me around to face him.

"Don't touch me, you jerk!" I spat, swatting him away.

He caught my wrist, pulling me toward him. "You can't be out here all alone," he grumbled as he tried to lead me away, but I dug in my heels.

"What do you care? Go back to Jen. She's probably missing you!"

"You're drunk, Lena, for Goddess's sake!"

"I am not!"

"I saw you drinking that wine-"

"Was the before or after you had your tongue down her-"

He let go of my hand, and stepped away from me, fixing me with a glare that made a chill run down the length of my spine.

"I'm not drunk," I reiterated, crossing my arms over my chest again.

"I don't really care," he said calmly. "I just don't want you to get snatched up by whatever is in the woods, Lena."

I eyed him, noticing the concern lining his face as he glanced quickly into the woods and then back at me.

“Are you... scared?” I asked, narrowing my eyes at him.

He gave me a dirty look, but the lines of concern didn’t fade from his face as he folded his arms. “I’m not-”

“You look like you think something is going to jump out of the woods and grab-”

Something big moved in the woods nearby, and all of the fine, downy hair on my body stood on end as I instinctively moved to Xander’s side. He was looking into the woods without blinking, standing totally, and utterly, still.

“Let’s go back to the cottage,” he whispered.

“O-okay,” I squeaked, trying not to tremble. Xander knitted his fingers in mine as we walked backward several yards, our eyes not leaving the all-encompassing darkness of the woods.

He let go of my hand as we returned to the fire. People had already started to leave, their darkened forms just visible above the fire that was now burning down to embers.

Elaine and Bethany were nowhere to be found, and I was happy to see Jen was gone as well, Xander and I being the last to leave. I had to practically jog to keep up with him as I followed him along the path to the cottages, but noticed the tension leave his shoulders as we neared the bunkhouse, where the pathway was bathed in soft, yellow light.

He took an audible breath as he looked over his shoulder, motioning for me to walk in front of him as we closed in on the cottage.

I went inside first, shedding my coat and flannel while Xander came through the door. He turned, locking the door tightly behind him and drawing the curtains after peering out the window for a moment.

“I see you found curtains,” I said, noticing the slight tremble in my voice as I took off my boots. He nodded, moving toward the woodstove and opening it to add a few more split logs to keep US warm overnight.

“I’m going to board up these windows,” he murmured as he stoked the fire.

“Why would you do that?”

He paused, then closed the woodstove, not bothering to reply.

“Are you ready for bed?” he asked. “Or do you want a cup of tea?”

“I think I’m going to brush my teeth and go to bed,” I said, meeting his eye.

He nodded, looking stressed, which sent a pang of guilt through my heart as I turned from him and fetched a pair of pajamas from the bedroom.

I caught my reflection in the bathroom mirror as I finished brushing my teeth and closed my eyes. I didn't know what was wrong with me. Something about Xander was nagging at me. He seemed to be everywhere I was, and when he wasn't... I wanted him to be.

I came out of the bathroom, glancing at him as he crouched near the wood stove before I turned into the bedroom. I heard him close the wood stove once more, then walk into the bathroom and shut the door behind him as he readied for bed.

I fished a fresh pair of clothes out of my duffle bag to lay out for tomorrow, telling myself I would actually unpack and make use of the shallow dresser first thing in the morning, when he came back into the room.

I turned to him, clutching one of my sweaters.

"I'm sorry, Xander," I said, exhaling deeply as I looked up at him. He was shirtless again, of course; he would be shirtless right when I was trying to apologize and make my feelings of jealousy sound reasonable, mostly to myself. "I shouldn't have made a big deal about you... and Jen."

"It's okay," he said, taking off his pants right in front of me, standing in nothing but his boxers.

He was really beautiful, I couldn't deny it. Sculpted like fine art, his hair ruffled and skin on the edge of being sun-kissed. I hadn't noticed the freckles along the bridge of his nose, which made him look slightly boyish as he wadded up his jeans and tossed them toward the far wall. "Can I ask why you're so bothered by it?"

"I just feel like... like we should be focused on our field study."

"Is that how you really feel?"

His tone caught me off guard. His voice was soft, almost a purr as he took a step toward me. He flipped off the light switch, and we were blanketed in almost total darkness, save for the faint light that was coming through the new curtains he had found for the bedroom window.

The light traveled over his skin as he stepped toward me, and I found myself locked on the way it made the rigid muscles of his chest and abdomen stand out even more than they had when the light was on.

The desire I had been trying to bury was threatening to claw its way to the surface as he took another step toward me, effectively closing the distance between us. I couldn't deny it. Whether it was true longing, or just sheer curiosity, I didn't know. All I knew for sure was that I wanted him.

"I don't know what I feel," I replied, hoping he couldn't read my conflicted expression.

I began to turn away from him, facing the bed as I prepared to climb into it, and into my sleeping bag. But he touched my arm with the back of his fingers, and my body reflexively turned back to him.

"Kiss me," he whispered, his tone gentle, yet commanding. "Maybe it'll tell us both what we need to know."

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 509

Xander*

I found Henry in the warehouse. He'd laid the creature on a tarp and was sitting on an upside down bucket nearby, looking pale.

I walked toward the old man, not bothering to announce my presence. He knew I was there. He knew I'd be coming to him with questions.

"It's a wolf, isn't it?" I said, stopping short of the tarp. I looked down at the body of the wolf, noticing for the first time the lack of blood on the tarp, and on Henry's clothes. I peered at him, narrowing my eyes as he rose from the bucket. "Who is it?"

Henry shook his head, looking exceedingly exhausted. He ran his hand over his face, looking down at the tarp through his fingers.

"Gretta was the only worker unaccounted for in Bethany's count."

I closed my eyes, picturing the soft-spoken young woman with glasses and softly curling blonde hair who I had seen at breakfast the morning before. She hadn't been at the bonfire, of that I was certain.

"What did this to her?" I asked, but Henry shook his head, wiping his hands on his pants as he rose from the bucket.

"I don't know."

"Lena and I heard something in the woods during the bonfire, something large--"

"It didn't come from the woods, which are inside of the perimeter," Henry breathed, giving me a look of annoyance. "It came from over the wall."

"Has this happened before?" Adrenaline was coursing through me. My fingertips prickled as I knelt down by the tarp, taking a closer look at the remains of Gretta's wolf form. There wasn't much left.

"No one is allowed to shift on the property, especially after dark. Some do... but near the village. Never here."

"You didn't answer my question," I said sharply, watching the old man closely as he stood with his hands tucked in his pockets. "What happened to her blood?"

I'd noticed blood staining the ground where her body had been found, and a splatter of it on the wall, but not nearly enough to have bled her dry like she was now. I reached out to touch the wolf, running my fingers over her fur.

"I don't know--"

"Then who would know? Have the authorities been alerted?"

"Radcliffe is on his way."

"What authority does he have to investigate this? I'm talking about the police or the warriors belonging to the Alpha!"

"Radcliffe will determine what needs to be done," Henry scowled, crossing his arms over his chest.

"This girl has been murdered, and violently--"

“We don’t know that-“

“Are you kidding me?” I rose to my feet, clenching my hands into fists in an attempt to stop myself from reaching out and throttling the man. “She was ripped to pieces not even a quarter mile from where the rest of US were sleeping!”

I glanced back down at the remains of the wolf, shaking my head as I closed my eyes. It was the most awful thing I’d ever seen. Henry was hiding something. His face betrayed his calm, somewhat uninterested tone. He looked just as terrified and uneasy as I was sure I did.

“I’ll be alerting Morhan College to what happened, first thing in the morning. Lena and I-“

“What exactly do you mean to do with that girl, anyway?” Henry asked, staring directly into my eyes.

“What the f*ck do you mean by that?”

“Does her father know she’s sharing a bed with the likes of you?”

“Lena’s an adult, for one. Two, don’t try to deflect from-“

“You don’t know, do you?”

“Know what?” I blinked at him, taking a cautious step in his direction.

“Henry!” came a sharp voice from the door to the warehouse.

I turned, straightening my shoulders as Maxwell Radcliffe walked into the warehouse, followed by a tearful Bethany. Her face was reddened and raw from her tears, and I noticed she kept her gaze off the body of what I assumed had been a friend.

“Yes, sir,” Henry said, bobbing his head at Maxwell.

Maxwell stopped short of the tarp, not even looking down at it as he began to bark orders at Henry and Bethany. I watched in horror as Maxwell commanded Bethany to physically move the body to the center of the tarp with her bare hands. Bethany’s lower lip was trembling, her face contorting as she tried to stifle a sob as she bent down.

I reached out, clutching her shoulder and pulling her away from the tarp.

“I’ll do it,” I said loudly, glaring at Maxwell, then Henry. “Why is she even here?”

Fresh tears were streaming down Bethany’s face as she waited for Maxwell to speak. She looked terrified, which made me want to scream with frustration at the fact she had been called to assist in this matter.

“Get her out of here, for Goddess’s sake. What is the matter with you people?” I hissed.

Maxwell turned to me, looking me up and down before a smirk stretched across his mouth.

“That’ll be all, Bethany,” he said slowly, dismissing her with his hand. Bethany bobbed her head, once, then walked out of the warehouse. Henry watched her go, his eyes glossed over with concern. “You too, Henry. We will talk in the morning.”

Henry didn't even glance in our direction as he stalked out of the warehouse after Bethany.

I rounded on Maxwell, not bothering to hide my contempt. He seemed unphased by the fact that someone had been murdered on his property.

"What's going on here?"

"Someone died, obviously,' he said, waving toward the tarp. *No need for alarm. This happens from time to time."

"Time to time? How often has someone been tom to shreds on your property?"

"Oh, nothing quite like this. That's not what I meant. Only that people do go missing here. The wall is more than a boundary, you must understand. Those hills to the west... well, no one exactly knows what's out there. That's why it's a rule that my workers cannot shift on the grounds. If they go into the village, that's one thing, but here?" He tucked his hands behind his back, walking a wide circle around the tarp as he peered down at it. "I can't help those that run into trouble outside of the boundary. Past the wall, they're no longer my responsibility."

"This happened within the walls,' I argued, but he waved his hand in dismissal.

"The Alpha of Crimson Creek has already been notified. If it suits him, he'll send warriors to investigate."

"If it suits him?" I exclaimed.

Maxwell's eyes flashed with mirth as he shook his head. 'Ah, the Alpha only cares about the lives of young women if they're entertaining him in bed, but even that is short-lived. He has a short fuse, and an even shorter attention span. I keep him off the property for the sake of our female workers. But, you wouldn't even know of him, would you? Where are you from, exactly?"

"The south," I said, not going into detail.

Maxwell nodded, accepting this as all he likely cared to know.

"Since Bethany and Henry appear to be useless in this situation. I'll have you cover the body. Keep everyone out of the warehouse for the day, at least until the warriors arrive."

"Did Henry do this?*" I asked in a low, serious tone.

Maxwell blinked at me, shocked, then threw his head back and laughed heartily. "Oh Goddess, no. Henry looks and acts tough, but I've known him since my childhood. He's reclusive now, but he didn't used to be, no. Lost his mate when he was my age, from what I understand, and never recovered.'

I considered this, watching Maxwell closely as he continued to look down at the wolf on the tarp.

"How did he lose his mate?" I asked, hoping I didn't already know the answer.

"In the manner that has become the reason why I implement the rule of not shifting on the property. The hills... they call to you in your wolf form. No one comes back from the hills, and if they do-' he motioned towards the tarp, an odd smile touching the corner of his mouth.

I swallowed against the severe anxiety tightening my throat, watching him as he walked away. He disappeared through the door leading into the warehouse, shutting the door behind him.

Lena was waiting by the door when I knocked. She looked tired, her pale blonde hair sticking out in all directions of the messy bun she had piled on top of her head. I knew she hadn't slept. Neither had I. I doubt we would have been able to if we tried.

I stepped inside the cottage as she held the door open for me. She wordlessly grabbed the kettle off of the woodstove and poured US both mugs of strong, black tea. I watched her as she stirred sugar into the mugs, her gray eyes lined with fatigue. In the soft morning light coming through the window I could just see the strange flakes of blue around her irises.

She was beautiful-hands down the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen in my life. I wondered, as I accepted the mug of tea from her, what would've happened between us last night if we hadn't been interrupted by a gruesome tragedy.

Kissing her hadn't quelled the searing desire I felt toward her. I needed more.

"So? What happened?" She sat down in the chair by the door, gripping her tea between her hands as she looked up at me, waiting for me to tell her every detail about how I'd spent my night.

I told her as much as I thought was useful, not wanting to scare her to death by describing the violent injuries afflicted to the wolf.

But I did tell her it had been a shifter who worked at the farm.

"I don't understand how that's possible. We were just-just at the firepit. We hadn't been here longer than an hour before-"

"I know," I cut in, sitting down on Lena's trunk, which we found wouldn't fit anywhere else in the cottage. I didn't mention that the fur had been still warm when I touched the wolf in the warehouse, the thought of it making my skin crawl.

"If she died in her wolf form, wouldn't she... shift back?"

"I thought so, but she didn't." Was it because the wolf had been totally drained of her blood and the powers within? I didn't want Lena to speculate, so I was mum about it.

"Xander, this is serious! What's going to happen now?"

"I don't know, Lena. Bethany sent everyone to bed and told me we'd talk in the morning. So, I'm here. I doubt anyone is awake yet." That is, if anyone was able to sleep at all.

There was a knock on the door, which startled US both. I stood up, motioning for Lena to remain in the chair as I took a single step toward the door and opened it.

Henry was on the porch, looking worse for wear.

"We need to talk," he said gruffly, then turned on his heel and began to walk off.

I glanced at Lena, who was now standing.

“Stay here-“

“Move!” she said, pushing past me in nothing but her pajamas and slippers.

I closed the door behind me as I followed her and Henry, sipping my tea and trying not to spill it as Henry led us through the grain. He was moving US away from the compound, and I felt suddenly uneasy about it, hissing under my breath for Lena to slow down so she could walk in step with me.

She didn’t listen, of course. But within minutes I found myself standing next to her on the edge of the forest where a creek was bubbling over moss-covered rocks behind Henry, who was staring at the two of US, his face void of expression.

“Maxwell is not telling Morhan about what happened,” he said, looking from Lena to me. “And I don’t think you should, either.”

“What? Why?” I questioned, although I wasn’t totally surprised about the fact that Maxwell wanted to keep this a secret from the college. Something was up with that guy.

“I don’t know. I didn’t ask. He is the boss here. But I need you both to leave, immediately.”

“We can’t do that,” Lena laughed, shaking her head. “I need this to graduate!”

“At the risk of your own life?” Henry argued.

I opened my mouth to speak, but Lena interjected. “I won’t be shifting anytime soon, Henry. I’m not twenty-one yet!”

“That doesn’t matter-“

“Why don’t you tell US what’s really going on here, Henry?” I said, taking a step forward so Lena was slightly behind me.

Henry looked me up and down, inhaling deeply and holding his breath for a moment before letting it out slowly, his nostrils flaring.

“This stays between US. I’m not trying to cause mass panic.”

“Alright,” Lena said, nudging me to also agree.

I just nodded, narrowing my eyes at Henry.

“There’s something out there. I don’t know what it is. It’s like us, though, a shifter. It hunts at night, and has been encroaching on Crimson Creek and the surrounding estates for five years now. Five years ago is when the blood root started to show up near the village, and when our medical herbs started rotting. I believe it’s connected. I believe... all those young women-“

“There have been more?” Lena gasped.

Henry nodded, looking grave. “Several in the village. All young women of child bearing age. All were found exactly like Gretta was found... bloodless, in their wolf forms. But one... one was never found.”

“Carly Maddox,’ Lena whispered.

I looked down at her, then at Henry. This was turning out to be a lot more than I’d signed up for.

Sold as the Alpha King’s Breeder Chapter 510

Lena*

It’d been three days since the attack, or murder, whatever it was being called. The Alpha of Crimson Creek had sent warriors to investigate. They’d taken away the body, swept the perimeter of the Radcliffe Estate... but that was it. No one said much about it, in fact, after a full day had passed. The only person who had given US any useful information had been Henry.

But Henry was a man of few words, and he didn’t speculate. He’d told me what I already knew from Abigail-that Carly Maddox had been a Morhan student whose field study was situated in the village of Crimson Creek. According to a single witness, she had just walked out one day, leaving the shabby townhouse she shared with four other students and walked into the night, never to be seen again.

But the fact that she was, in fact, never seen again, was what was most interesting about what Henry had to say. He told Xander and me that several young women had been killed over the past five years, but they had always been found not far from where the attack happened.

“So we’re dealing with a serial killer,” I said, pacing in front of the makeshift lab Xander had erected in the warehouse. He was bent at the waist, peering into a microscope as he examined a slide with the sample of blackened, rotted valerian root I had harvested earlier in the morning.

“We’re not dealing with anything, Lena,’ he protested gruffly, furrowing his brow in my direction as he straightened to his full height. “We’re here for school. That’s it-”

“But don’t you want to know, Xander? Something weird is happening here!”

“It’s none of our business-”

“One of the workers was attacked and killed!”

“Lena,” he breathed, taking his gloves off and tossing them in a wastebasket. “Leave it alone.”

I rolled my eyes and stalked away from him, glancing over my shoulder before I left the warehouse. He was writing on a clipboard, totally uninteresting in discussing what I believed to be a huge deal.

But I knew it was bothering him. I’d gotten my original wish. We were no longer sharing a bed because he’d taken to sitting in the armchair, facing the door, with an iron skillet in his lap every night in the event he needed to protect US from whatever was lurking outside.

We hadn’t said a word about what had happened between US, either, for which I was grateful.

I’d been overwhelmed and blinded by a heavy haze of lust, ready to lose my virginity to a man I neither knew well nor liked very much, only to be snapped back to reality by someone getting torn to shreds not even a mile from our cottage.

I felt awful about it. But also completely unsatisfied.

I swallowed against the lump in my throat as I walked to the bunkhouse. It was nearing lunch, and Bethany had asked me to sit with her and eat something before we went back out to tend the lower gardens. I was thankful for a respite from my conflicting feelings as I stepped through the door and removed my boots.

But I wasn't getting away from it that easily, I quickly realized. Elaine and Bethany were sitting at the dining room table when I arrived and had a plate laid out for me-and questions.

"How long have you known him?" Elaine asked as I bit into an apple.

I shrugged, chewing slowly in hopes the conversation would move past the subject of Xander. He was the only thing anyone wanted to talk about after what had happened.

"Like, a week, honestly," I said coolly, sipping my glass of root beer. Elaine rolled her eyes at Bethany, who fixed me with a knowing stare.

"Jen is in love with him," Elaine said, leaning back in her chair. "She wants nothing more than to jump his bones after watching him take command of the, uhm, situation the other night."

"Elaine, we're not talking about that until we hear something concrete from the Alpha, after his investigation. Radcliffe's orders." Bethany looked exhausted. She'd likely been fielding questions about what had happened for the past several days.

"I know, I know," Elaine replied, waving her hand in dismissal. "Anyway, Jen is really hoping he's coming to the party tonight, at the pub. I told her not to get her hopes up--"

"What party?" I asked, feeling incredibly territorial over Xander, even though I had no reason to feel that way. What had happened between US hadn't been more than a kiss, right?

"Some of the workers are going to the village tonight to drink at the pub. It's not really a party," Bethany shrugged, shaking her head, "unless you like warm beer and old men with missing teeth hitting on you. They go most Fridays."

"I'm going," Elaine quipped, nudging my arm. "You should come!"

"Sure," I breathed, even though inside I was on fire with jealousy.

Jen would, no doubt, seek out Xander and ask him to go with her. I found it unlikely he'd accept, but there was still a chance I'd be wrong. And despite the fact that I knew in my soul nothing further should happen between Xander and me, I hated the idea of him being with anyone else, especially Jen.

I had no reason to dislike her, though. She hadn't done anything to me. She'd just been in Xander's line of sight, and I hated it.

So, when Elaine pulled up in front of the cottage in a run-down car later that evening, its mint-colored paint covered in large splotches of rust, I decided it was time to confide in someone. I needed someone to help me unravel my intense feelings. Otherwise, they'd take over completely.

"The front doors don't open!" she hollered as I walked up. "You have to climb in through the backdoor!"

“How’d you get in?” I laughed, yanking open the back door with an audible crunch and tossing my purse inside.

“Same as you,” she giggled as I struggled to climb over the center console. I grunted with effort, nearly upside down as I tried to get my legs out from under me. I wiped my brow and adjusted my weight in my seat, reaching back for the seatbelt, which I found was not there.

“I won’t crash. Don’t worry. At least not today. It’s not in the cards!”

“You’re wild, Elaine,” I laughed, slightly panicked as the car lurched forward several times before the clutch gave way, and she was able to put it in gear. “Where’s everyone else?”

“I don’t really like anyone else, besides you and Bethany. I pretended like I wasn’t going so they couldn’t use me for my car. They’re all piled in the back of the farm truck-’

Something slammed into the back window of the car and we both screamed.

“Sorry,” Xander mumbled, wrenching open the back door and sliding inside. Elaine and I looked at each other, both slightly red in the face. “I missed the truck.”

“Jen will be severely disappointed,” Elaine teased, fumbling with the clutch once more. “I thought I’d just ran someone over, Xander!”

“This thing would’ve just rolled right over the top of me,” he huffed, stretching his arms out over the back of the seat. “I didn’t mean to smack the window so hard.”

“It’s fine,” she drawled, tapping her hands on the steering wheel as we bounced over the uneven dirt road toward the forest. “Happy to drive you.”

“Can you hand me my purse?” I asked, looking over my shoulder at Xander.

He met my eye for a moment, which was honestly the first time we’d made true eye contact since the night of the murder. He handed me my purse without breaking his gaze, which was slightly unnerving, but I stifled the ripple of heat his stare was eliciting and opened my purse, fishing around for the tube of lipstick rolling around at the bottom.

“There’s no mirror on the vizor. You’ll have to wing it,” Elaine laughed as we drove out of the forest and across the bridge.

The village of Crimson Creek came into view, rising in the distance against a vivid sunset. I quickly put on the lipstick, which was a warm peach color, and put it back in my bag. I could feel Xander’s eyes on the back of my neck and was a little irritated he had interrupted the one opportunity I had with Elaine, alone, to talk about him.

He hadn’t said anything in response to Elaine’s comment about Jen, though. That had to count for something.

It was a short ride into town, and soon we were pulling to a stop in front of a tavern.

“There’s a hotel, over there-’ Elaine pointed in the distance, and I could see the farm truck parked outside the hotel’s entrance. “Bethany got US a few rooms, but she’s driving back tonight if you don’t want to stay in the village this weekend.”

“That was kind of her,” I said, then we both looked back at Xander, who was staring back at US.

“What?” he said, arching his brow as he looked at Elaine, then me.

“The front doors don’t open. We have to climb out,” Elaine said, motioning toward the back door.

“Really?” he asked, looking skeptical.

“Move, Xander!” I urged, and he nodded, giving US both a dubious look as he slid out of his seat. Elaine went first, climbing over the center console in a practiced fashion. I, on the other hand, struggled significantly and to the point that Xander groaned with frustration and bent his head to reenter the car, pulling me over the front seat with his hands clasped firmly under my armpits.

I squirmed against his touch, turning a deep shade of fuchsia as he yanked me out of the car.

“Stop, stop!” I said breathlessly, swatting him with my purse.

“What’s wrong with you?” he asked, reaching down to push a lock of hair away from my eyes.

“That tickled. I’m-I’m ticklish,” I breathed.

He was looking into my eyes, and I noticed the hint of a smile touching the corner of his mouth.

Elaine cleared her throat, her hands on her hips as she watched US.

Xander’s demeanor changed abruptly.

“Get a new car, Elaine,’ Xander said grouchy, abruptly turning on his heel as he walked into the bar, leaving US standing outside on the curb.

“He’s great fun,’ Elaine said curtly, giving me a lopsided, teasing smile. “I think he likes you.”

“He doesn’t,” I sighed, adjusting my purse strap.

“Why do you say that?’ Elaine held the door to the bar open for me as we stepped inside.

I shrugged, deciding maybe I wasn’t all that ready to speak my true, conflicting feelings, and I most definitely didn’t want to talk about the whole Slate situation.

Thankfully, I didn’t need to answer. Elaine waved at someone across the bar and linked her arm in mine. We passed through the crowded tavern, which was filled with a surprisingly young mix of people. There were a few older men, just like Bethany had said, but they were lounging in a corner table chatting amiably with each other.

Everyone else seemed to be around my age; college students, or farm workers. Elaine seemed to know practically everyone in the room, and I realized how I knew nothing about her or where she came from. Based on how many people she recognized, she very likely could be a local of Crimson Creek. Elaine processed the medicinal plants for Radcliffe, turning them into salves and tinctures, but that was all I really knew about her.

“Everyone, this is Lena. She’s a Morhan student working at Radcliffe this fall,” she said, beaming as she pulled me beside her. Four or five people stared at me, nodding in greeting.

One man, in particular, gave me the kindest greeting of all. He was tall, though not as tall as Xander, but still towered above my short frame. He was tan, with dark curly and shockingly amber colored eyes that sent a thrill through me as they met mine.

“What are you studying, Lena?” he asked, bringing a pint of beer to his lips. Elaine excused herself, mumbling something about grabbing US a few drinks.

“Botany,” I said, my stomach fluttering a bit as he considered this.

“I’m Ben, one of Elaine’s friends. I live a few miles away from Radcliffe.”

“Oh, you live here, in Crimson Creek?”

“Within the territory, yeah, but my family owns its own property not far from the village. Where are you from?”

“Oh, the east,” I said hurriedly, glancing through the crowd as Elaine’s auburn curls made their way up to the bar.

“So, school brought you out here, then? Are you the only Morhan student?”

“No, uhm, my study partner is here as well. He’s studying chemistry and pharmaceuticals.”

“That tall guy staring right at me, right now, I presume?” Ben smirked, his eyes flicking away from mine and settling for a moment on the other end of the bar.

I exhaled and slowly turned my head in the direction Ben was staring. Xander was looking right at US.

“That’s him,” I sighed, glaring at Xander before turning my attention back to Ben.

“Is he going to beat me up if I buy you a drink?”

Ben’s eyes met mine again, and I shrugged.

“There’s only one way to find out!”