

## Kings Breeder 511

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 511

Xander\*

Every once in a while, I caught a glimpse of Lena in the crowd, her platinum blonde hair piled high on the top of her head, which made her a few inches taller than she normally was, but she was still very short, and disappeared often in the swell of people lingering in large groups around the bar.

I clutched my pint of beer as I watched her talk to the dark haired man, who occasionally looked in my direction, giving me a careful eye.

He was standing a little too close to her, his eyes lingering on her for a little too long.

And Lena was enjoying it, smiling and laughing at pretty much every word that came out of his mouth, which made me irrationally angry as I drained my first pint and parted the crowd for another.

As I waited by the bar for my drink, I scanned the crowd. I saw no sign of Jen, and for that I was thankful. Elaine's comment in the car earlier had made my stomach tie in a knot, and not because Lena was there to overhear it. I'd always found it difficult to turn down the attention of an attractive woman, and Jen's attention had been incredibly public. I'm sure people assumed something was going on with US.

But after last night. I'd been doing everything in my power to avoid her.

I'd been closing up my workstation in the warehouse. I knew everyone else was at dinner and that I'd have a few moments to work alone without the constant noise of repairs being made to the tractors and people walking in out to grab supplies. I didn't even see Jen come through the door of the warehouse. She was suddenly just there, wrapping her arms around me in a hungry embrace.

I'd given in because I am stupid. Maybe not stupid, but something along that line. I didn't really want Jen, but she was a good distraction from the overwhelming feelings of unrequited desire I felt for Lena. And, I figured she'd have information about the farm that I wouldn't be able to get out of Henry or Bethany.

But at that point I could tell that Jen's original acceptance of a casual make out session from time to time was turning into something I hadn't agreed to.

I hadn't meant for it to go this far, however. Using Jen for information was one thing, but people were starting to talk. She was starting to talk, and I knew I needed to end it before anyone got hurt.

I told her as such, with her arms still wrapped around my shoulders. She paused, her fingernails digging into the back of my neck. It had hurt a good deal, and I tried to push her away, but something came over her, a transformation of some kind, and she went absolutely ballistic.

She bit me, hard, hard enough to draw blood and give me a swollen lip for the rest of the evening. I'd had to fight her off, and she was surprisingly strong. I thought she was about to shift. The dark rings around her irises were glowing, and her fingernails were suddenly sharper than they had been before as she gripped me by my forearms, trying to drag me toward her again.

When she bit me a second time, this time on my chest, I knew I needed to do something. She damn near took a chunk out of my chest as I pushed her away, hard, and retreated toward the door, holding my hand over my chest to stop the blood from dripping down my stomach.

“What the hell is the matter with you?” I growled.

And she bared her teeth at me.

I wasn't sure what I saw. The shock of the moment, and the extreme stress of the last few days, was likely messing with my head. But for a moment I was sure her teeth were longer, and sharper, than they should have been.

Needless to say, I got the hell out of there and spent the rest of night sitting in the armchair by the door with a skillet I'd borrowed from the bunkhouse, ready to use it on Jen if she burst through the door, looking for a snack.

I cleared my throat as I snapped back to reality, ordering another beer. I hadn't really wanted to come into the village tonight, mostly because I hadn't expected Lena to want to go. I thought we'd have a few moments together tonight, just to talk, hopefully about what had happened between us a few nights ago... so we could do it again.

When I saw her getting into Elaine's rust box on four bald tires, I barely had enough time to catch up to the car before it sped off.

And now I was here, drinking by myself and watching her flirt with someone else..

“I could introduce you to him, if you want,” Elaine said, and I jumped, almost spilling my beer. She'd appeared out of nowhere and laughed at my shock. I could feel my cheeks coloring as I fixed her with a glare, but she only nudged me in the ribs. I winced as the nudge radiated toward my injury. My heart quickened. I felt like I'd been hit by a train.

“Lighten up, Xander.”

“I don't need an introduction. I don't want to interrupt them.”

“I don't believe that for a second,” Elaine grinned, rolling her eyes at me as she placed a few coins on the bar and grabbed her drink. “It's obvious you have a thing for Lena. It's written all over your face when you look at her.”

“You don't know me-”

“I know men, Xander. Simple creatures. And you, despite your dark, brooding aura, are just a man. So, are you going to stop that man from stealing your girl, or are you going to let her run off with him tonight like he asked her to do-”

I was already walking in Lena's direction before Elaine could finish speaking. I heard Elaine laugh behind me, but ignored her, stalking over to where Lena and the man were standing.

“Lena,\* I said sharply.

She turned around, narrowing her eyes at me. "Ben, this is Xander. He's my field study partner," she said sweetly, nudging me in the ribs when I came up behind her. I wished people would stop doing that, especially since my chest and abdomen felt like I was bruised all over after my run-in with Jen. I was standing very close to Lena, close enough the back of her head was settled against my chest, but I didn't move.

"Nice to meet you," Ben said, his eyes sizing me up.

I ran my tongue along the inside of my lower lip, arching my brow at him. "Tell me about yourself, Ben," I said coolly.

Lena glanced up at me, looking peeved at the tone of my voice. Ben smirked, opening his mouth to speak, but Lena cut him off.

"He lives here. A local.'

"Oh, is that right?" I narrowed my eyes at him.

"Whereabouts, exactly?\*

"A few miles away--"

"In what direction?'

"Xander,\* Lena said in a warning tone, her cheeks pinkening.

"To the south. It's not nearly as grand as the Radcliffe estate, I'm afraid." Ben took a sip of his beer, his eyes leaving mine to look back at Lena. "I was just telling Lena that I'd show her around sometime.\*"

"Next weekend, of course,\* Lena beamed.

Not on my watch.

"Well, unfortunately there's been a situation at Radcliffe, but I'm sure you've heard, being a local and all,' I said curtly, waiting for Ben to respond. I saw the glimmer of uncertainty in his eyes as he internally scrambled. I realized, with a smirk, he had no idea what I was talking about.

But, that also meant word hadn't spread around town about the murder at Radcliffe, which was also deeply concerning.

"It's unsafe for her to be out and about, with a stranger, no less," I continued.

"Ah, I guess-' Ben began.

"He knows the village, Xander, I'll be fine!"

"Come on, Lena," I said, taking her by the arm. "It's time to go.'

"What?"

"We have to go back to the estate, now.' I expected her to protest, but she didn't. I led her away, but she turned back to Ben, giving him a huge smile that made my blood boil.

"I'll see you next Friday-' Lena began.

“Lena!”

“What, Xander? Why are we leaving?!”

“Bye, you two!” Elaine teased as we passed, giving Lena a knowing, teasing smile. I could feel Lena blushing without even having to look down at her. Her skin was suddenly hot where I was touching her, leading her through the crowd by her wrist. I tightened my grip as we exited the bar, and saw Bethany in the distance standing outside the farm truck.

“Xander, wait!” Lena protested verbally, but not physically. If she really wanted to stay, I was sure she would’ve put up more of a fight about it.

“I don’t want US out here after dark, Lena, not with everything that’s been happening-”

“But we all have rooms at the hotel!”

“I don’t know this village. I feel safer having you back at the cottage, not running around town with a stranger-”

“Are you guys wanting to go back to the estate?” Bethany said as we approached.

“Yeah, are you headed up that way?!” I asked Bethany, who nodded.

“Are you sure? Pretty much everyone else is staying.”

“I’ll be staying next weekend for sure,” Lena said, glaring at me as she walked around the truck.

“We’ll talk about it,” I said, opening the door to the cab of the truck and ushering Lena inside. The village was busier than I’d thought it would be, especially now that it was nearing full dark. There had been a surprising amount of people at the bar and even more on the street as I climbed into the bed of the truck, and Bethany pulled forward.

It was a short drive back to the estate, but this time it was cloaked in total darkness, other than the truck’s headlights. I could hear Bethany and Lena talking, but their voices were just a murmur over the hum of the engine.

I took the first deep breath I’d taken all evening as the truck pulled up to the trio of cottages, happy to be back in a familiar place, knowing Lena would be safely tucked inside with me by the door with whatever weapon I choose tonight.

She dropped US off and then drove toward the warehouse, where she kept the truck overnight.

Lena turned to me with a strange expression on her face.

“That wasn’t much of a party, was it?”

“Not at all,” I breathed, motioning for her to walk up the steps.

She paused on the porch, however, looking down at me. “Are you sleeping in the bed tonight?”

“I was going to sleep in the chair again,” I said, my chest tightening as her face fell at my words. “I mean, unless you want me to sleep with you.”

"I think I'd sleep better if you did."

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 513

Lena\*

Xander and Henry had been talking, closed up in the bedroom, for more than two hours. I'd been kicked out of the cottage completely, made to sit on the porch like a child, twiddling my thumbs. It was Saturday, midday, and the rest of the workers were still enjoying their weekend in the village.

It was eerily quiet and dumping rain.

Henry pushed the door open and stepped out, not even looking in my direction as he walked down the steps and out into the downpour. I glared at him as I rose, crossing my arms over my chest as I watched him disappear around the corner of the cottage, walking toward his own with his medkit tucked under his arm.

I went inside, taking three long strides before reaching the bedroom door, and pushed it open.

Xander was sitting upright in bed, his back against the wall and his legs splayed out in front of him. His chest was bare, despite the chill, and his bandages were fresh. Henry must have changed them, I thought as I stepped into the room and leaned on the doorway, giving him a dubious look.

"I'm fine," he glared, adjusting his weight with a grimace. He patted the bed next to him, arching his brow at me. "Do you want to finish what we started?"

"You're insane," I hissed, tapping my fingers on my elbow as I looked him up and down. He looked much better than the night before. To my utter disbelief, the strange bruising was almost completely gone. 'You screamed Jen's name, by the way.'

"Henry told me. He also said it upset you."

"I was more upset about the thought of you dying right in front of me. You fell on top of me, you know. You passed out.'

"Did I hurt you?" he asked.

I colored, then shook my head. Maybe not physically, but emotionally?

He watched me for a moment, his eyes scanning my face to make sense of my troubled expression. 'Jen did this to me, Lena.'

"What?" I asked, not sure I'd heard him correctly.

"She bit me," he said casually, reaching over to grab a book off the bedside table.

I gaped at him, then furrowed my brow. "Stop messing with me, Xander!"

"I'm telling you the truth. She bit me. Obviously, she gave me... some kind of infection.'

"Was she marking you?" I asked, feeling suddenly weak and defensive. I hugged myself, wishing I hadn't asked it.

“She was trying to take a chunk out of me. Not the same thing,” he actually laughed, then patted the bed again with more force.

I gave in to him and crawled onto the bed. but didn't sit next to him like he wanted me to. I felt incredibly uneasy, and shocked, if I was being honest.

“What did you talk to Henry about?” I asked, wanting nothing more than to force him to dress and head to his makeshift lab in the warehouse. I knew Henry had smeared the black, murky blood root powder over his wound.

“Look, Lena,’ he breathed, sitting up a little straighter. “You’re going back to Morhan next weekend. Henry is going to set everything up-”

“No,” I said with force, but he held his hand up to silence me.

“It’s not up for debate. And its not for good, just for a week or so until all of this gets sorted out-”

“No, Xander! You don’t get to decide that for me!”

“It’s not just me behind this, Lena. Okay? Henry said Maxwell Radcliffe want you off the property until the Alpha of Crimson Creek gives US an update on the investigation.’

“Do I have any say in this?” I asked, feeling heated. “I’m here because-because I had no other options. It’s not fair. None of this is fair. You came here because for some reason you wanted to follow me. You said you felt obligated. And now? Someone gets murdered, you get a chunk bitten out of your chest, Henry is using some kind of witchcraft magic powder on you-’

“Witchcraft magic?” Xander arched his brow, interrupting me.

I scowled. ‘And no one is telling US anything. This place is weird, Xander. It’s scary.” I swallowed, feeling tears begin to well in my eyes. ‘I’m scared, okay? What happened last night was scary. Everytime we... the last time we...’

“The two times I’ve kissed you, something bad has happened,” he finished, shrugging one shoulder.

“I want to test the blood root Henry put on you. I can’t leave without doing it.”

“I know. And we will.’

I believed him. He was staring at me intently, waiting for me to say what I actually wanted to say. I didn’t know how he knew, but he shook his head, his eyes hard and serious.

“I ended things with Jen,’ he said calmly, tilting his head a little.

I looked away from him, settling my eyes on the curtains covering the window. “Before or after she mauled you?”

“Before. It wasn’t a sex thing.”

I blinked a few times then turned to look at him again. When he’d kissed me, he’d been gentle. He’d been caring, asking me if I was okay. The first time we’d kissed, we had almost just gone all the way, and he didn’t just assume I’d wanted it. He’d asked.

But I knew he'd been holding back. I could see the dissatisfaction now, lingering behind his eyes. For a split second, I wanted to know what he'd done with Jen... and if he'd treated her like he treated me.

But then I felt the tears again and quickly changed my mind.

"So, she attacked you?"

"Yes, I think. I thought... Lena, look. I'm sorry-" he proceeded to tell me what happened in the warehouse, just hours before he caught up to Elaine's car as we were heading to the village. He wasn't worried about mincing his words to hide the truth about what happened. He was honest with me.

"Where's Jen now? Did she go to the village?"

"I didn't see her," he said. "Did you?"

I shook my head then brought my knees into my chest, hugging them.

"I told Henry what happened. He's going to take care of it."

"By doing what? Telling Maxwell? He doesn't seem to be too interested in what happens around here."

"That's why you need to go back to Morhan for a few days, maybe a week at the most. Please, Lena."

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Xander seemed fine, despite the fact that the night before he had passed out cold, crushing me, and requiring rescue from Henry and Bethany.

I was standing in the warehouse, my arms crossed over my chest as I watched him prepare the slide of blood root. He'd scraped some of the dried powder off his bandages.

"It's not going to be a great sample," he admitted, his head bent to his task. I felt a rush of longing as I watched him work. I'd taken Xander for a playboy, someone who didn't take their studies seriously. In reality, he was meticulous and highly intelligent, even if I would never admit that I thought that way about him to his face. "It's mixed with my blood, but you'll see that on the slide. You took a chem class, I'm guessing?"

"Bio chem," I said, deciding to leave out that it was just a basic course.

He nodded, not looking up at me as he carefully squished the sample between two thin pieces of sterile glass. He was wearing a flannel shirt, but it was unbuttoned because of the pain in his chest, his bandages clearly visible as he placed the slide under the microscope. He peered into it for a moment then began to adjust it until he was happy with the resolution.

"There's a box of slides in the cabinet over there," he said, waving his hand in no clear direction. "Bring them to me."

"Yes, sir," I mumbled. I grabbed the box out of the cabinet and set it on the table then stood back a bit and waited for him to show me what he was looking at.

"Find the slide that says valerian root," he commanded.

I rolled my eyes. "Do you ever say please?"

“Rarely,” he deadpanned, squinting into the microscope.

“What’s going on here?”

Maxwell Radcliffe stepped into the warehouse, wearing one of his strange, dated outfits. Xander glanced over at him, his gaze lingering on the man for a few seconds before he bent back to the microscope.

“Work, for our study-”

“I thought I told Henry that was on pause,” Maxwell said as he walked closer to US, his hands tucked behind his back. He looked me up and down, a smile touching the corner of his mouth. I felt uncomfortable under his gaze. Xander picked up on this, glancing over at me and then rising to his full height, looking annoyed.

“Lena’s here until next Saturday, at least-”

“The study is off until then. If you want to work, do so in the fields. The last harvest of the year is coming up, and it’ll be all hands on deck.” Maxwell was looking at the box of slides then shifted his gaze to me. I inhaled, nostrils flaring, as he eyed me with interest. “You might be students, but this is my property. This isn’t up for debate.”

Xander didn’t say anything, but I could feel the heat coming off of him as he looked at Maxwell with a look of sheer contempt.

“Your girlfriend is taking a sabbatical, Mr. Smith. I’m afraid she didn’t have the opportunity to tell you,” Maxwell smirked. He was obviously talking about Jen. Xander eyed him but didn’t bother to correct him. “And Lena, it’s been a week, and I haven’t yet had the pleasure of dining with you and showing you the manor. I’ll call on you before you return to Morhan.”

With that, he bobbed his head to US and turned on his heel, leaving the warehouse almost as quickly as he came.

Xander immediately bent his head back down to the microscope. He peered into it for several minutes, then sighed, his hands curling into fists for a moment before he flexed them.

“The sample is too saturated with blood.”

“You couldn’t see anything?”

“Nothing I could readily identify as abnormal.” He ran his tongue along the inside of his lower lip, meeting my eye. Then, he shrugged. “We’ll have to get a clean sample.”

“Of blood root?”

“What else?”

“We’d have to go over the wall-”

“I’ll go over the wall, while you stay here-”



The truck drove by the open door of the warehouse, pulling to a stop in front of the bunkhouse. Xander quickly buttoned up his flannel, glancing at me before the two of us walked toward the entrance of the warehouse and watched our fellow workers, who should have been in the village for another night jump out of the bed of the truck.

Elaine's car pulled up next, the engine clunking painfully. Xander chuckled, shaking his head as Elaine stepped out, waving away a noxious puff of smoke coming from underneath the hood.

"You guys missed out on a fun night," she grinned, shaking her head as she followed the rest of the workers into the bunkhouse.

"Why'd they come back early?" I asked.

Xander narrowed his eyes, and I followed his gaze to Bethany, who had obviously been the one to pick them up from the village.

"Oh yeah, the invitation is circling everywhere. Someone leaked it, and now fakes are being made. Everyone is trying to get in, from what I've heard. The royal families had to put out a statement about it," said one of the workers as we all crammed around the dining room table in the bunkhouse.

I was shoulder to shoulder with Elaine and Bethany, picking at a piece of chicken pot pie as I listened to the conversation taking place.

"I heard Prince Charlie has a date already, and she's an Alpha's daughter from one of the northwestern packs," someone else said.

Elaine groaned, shaking her head. "Damn, he's the most handsome one."

I grimaced, stifling a chuckle as I took a bite of my food.

"I'm just shocked you didn't know about what happened between Prince Oliver and his brother," said a young, black-haired woman at the far end of the table as she turned to her companion, twisting a lock of hair around her finger. The woman sitting next to her rolled her eyes.

"That Prince William's fiancé was Oliver's lover?"

I flinched, finding it suddenly hard to swallow. I looked up from my plate and met Xander's eyes. He was looking right at me, hard.

"I heard," said the black-haired woman, "that Oliver and... what was her name? Prince William's fiancé?"

"Hollis," someone else said.

"Yeah, Hollis. I heard that she and Prince Oliver had been childhood sweethearts and were madly in love, but then she turned twenty-one, and... Oliver wasn't her mate.

Prince William was."

I closed my eyes for a moment then abruptly rose from the table.

"Are you alright?" Elaine whispered as the conversation about the royal family went on without a hitch.

I nodded, giving her a weak smile. "Fine, just tired is all."

“Okay, well, see you tomorrow!”

I walked out of the dining room and into the foyer, pulling on my boots. I heard someone talking about how Jen had gone to visit her family, and then someone else questioned it, laughing about Jen consistently going on short trips with random excuses. I found that odd but didn't glance back at the table as I opened the door and stepped out into the night.

It was chilly like usual, and a fine mist hung over the ground as I walked the short distance to the tidy row of stone cottages. Henry's cottage had a light on, and I felt somewhat comforted by it. I had nothing but endless questions for him, but I had a feeling he'd never answer them. I'd have to find the answers to every single one of them on my own.

“Hey, wait,” Xander huffed, catching up to me before I even reached the porch. He looked tired, and I didn't blame him. No one else but Bethany and Henry knew about his injury and what had happened to him the night before.

“You could've stayed if you weren't done eating. I'm fine here-”

“No, I-” he paused, stepping past me to hold the door open for me. “I think I'd rather hang out with you, Lena.”

I recognized the look in his eyes.

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 514

\*Lena\*

I wanted nothing more than to crawl into my sleeping bag and close my eyes. I was exhausted. I truly hadn't slept much at all over the past week. This was not at all how I'd envisioned my time spent on my field study.

\*Lene\*

I wanted nothing more than to crawl into my sleeping bag and close my eyes. I was exhausted. I truly hadn't slept much at all over the past week. This was not at all how I'd envisioned my time spent on my field study.

I was meant to be researching the plant samples and soil, determining the best course of action for the trees to not only improve their harvests but also gather information on the trees' forest as a whole to add to my report that I was required to turn in to Morhen.

Instead, I found myself sitting on the edge of the bed I shared with Xander, unwinding his bandages.

“It looks so much better,” I whispered, in awe of the abrupt change taking place on his skin. I'd expected the wound to be large based on the damage it had done to his body, but it was small, just a few teeth marks where the swelling had gone down.

“I'll get the sample we need,” he said, closing his eyes as he leaned back against his pillow with his hands behind his head, “while you're back on campus.”

It wasn't the question. I knew pushing the subject would be fruitless.

"I need to put new bendeges on you—"

"I'm fine for e minute. I've been weering them ell dey."

I plected my hendes in my lep, pursing my lips. Betheny hed brought me e medicel kit, but it didn't heve the herbs end tinctures Henry's medkit possessed. It wes obvious to me that Henry's medkit wes for him, end him elone.

"Well," I sighed, rising from the bed, "I'm going to reed for e bit. I brought my textbooks on the medicel uses of plents locel to this eree—"

"Lene, we're both exheusted. Please, just sleep."

"We need to know—"

"You're not going to find whet you're looking for in those books." His eyes were closed es he spoke, on the edge of sleep himself. "The bed's werm. Ley down, okey?"

"Not until you heve fresh bendeges," I protested.

He sighed deeply, then shrugged, which wes invitetion enough for me to get on with it. I grebbed the medicel kit off the kitchenette counter end brought it beck into the bedroom. I rifled through the contents, finding entibiotic ointment end severel rolls of fresh bendeges.

"I'm going to go wesh my hendes," I seid, looking down et the supplies to meke sure I hed everything I needed. Xender could eesily do this himself, but I knew he wesn't going to. He'd let the wound get infected egein before he mede e big deel out of it.

I did ell the little things I needed to do in order to get reedy for bed, brushed my teeth, then weshed my hendes thoroughly. By the time I'd chenged into pejemes end my hendes were so cleen they were rew, I found Xender sitting up in bed, looking toward the window.

"Did you see something?" I esked es I ceme beck into the room.

He shook his heed, turning in my direction, his fece void of expression. "Let's get this over with," he mumbled, his shoulders felling e bit es I stood in front of him, positioning myself between his knees es I bent to my tesk.

"This is going to scer. I think you should've gotten stitches, honestly."

"No, thanks," he seid with e brief smile, then shook his heed es if thinking of some long-forgotten memory. "I've never needed them."

"Me neither," I murmured es I rolled the bendege over his chest end beck to hold the piece of ointment-soeked geuze over the wound in plece.

"Why does telking about the royel family meke you so uncomfotable?" he esked, ebruptly chenging the subject.

I blinked, then met his eye. "Whet do you meen?"

"Over dinner, when everyone wes telking about the Princes of Poldesse."

"It's just gossip," I replied, feeling a slight tightening in my stomach. I tucked the loose end of the bandage in place over his chest. "It's all anyone wants to talk about."

"Not you, though."

"No, not me."

"Do you know them?"

"Who?" I asked as I put the supplies back in the medkit, avoiding his gaze.

"The princes?"

I closed the medkit, chewing on the inside of my cheek. "Why would you think that?"

Xander was watching me closely, tilting his head to the side as I straightened up to my full height and looked in his direction.

"You looked a little defensive when Prince Oliver was mentioned."

"I think his situation is sad, that's all. It's rude to speculate on what really happened and gossip about it." I couldn't hide the bite in my voice. My cheeks reddened as I scooped up the medical supplies, turning from the bed to set it on the dresser near the window.

"Why would you care?"

I felt uneasy as I turned back to him. I kept my face neutral as I walked to the opposite wall and turned out the light. Now, he couldn't see the emotions playing over my face as I climbed into the bed and into my sleeping bag.

There was a moment of silence between us as we settled into our sleeping bags. I was lying flat on my back, staring at the ceiling when Xander turned to me, his arm tucked under his pillow.

"You know, the princess is rumored to be very powerful."

"How would you even know that? No one has seen her in years."

"Weird, right?"

"I already told you I thought it was rude to gossip about them," I huffed, turning my head to look eyes with him.

"It's not gossip. Just... speculation."

"What is there to even speculate about? Maybe she just doesn't like being out in public and constantly ridiculed!"

"Is that what it's like?"

I opened my mouth, but snapped it shut, narrowing my eyes at him. "You were the one who wanted to go to sleep, Xander." I closed my eyes and began to turn away from him when I heard him chuckle.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing," he said, shrugging his shoulders.

"Leave me alone," I grumbled as I turned away from him, rustling my sleeping bag loudly just to be annoying.

"Fine," he replied.

I lay there for a moment, opening my eyes to stare blankly at the wall. It was raining again, the sound of it reverberating through the room as it pounded against the metal roof.

Sleep was lost on me, yet again. I knew Xender was still awake. He was facing my back, the two of us only inches away from each other.

I heard his sleeping bag rustle, and then the bed creaked as he moved closer to me, effectively spooning himself around me while zipped up in his sleeping bag.

It felt nice; I was willing to admit that. His warmth was penetrating my sleeping bag, warming me from within. His arm came around me, pulling me closer, as he nuzzled his face against the back of my head.

"You're trying to annoy me," I whispered.

"I'm just getting comfortable. There's no room on here with the two of us unless we're touching."

He wasn't wrong, but still....

I felt his chest rise and fall, then he cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry about Jen. I know it hurt you."

"It's fine—"

"Not to me."

"We're not together, Xender."

"This feels pretty together to me," he whispered into my hair.

I felt a rush of desire as his breath tickled my neck.

I wanted him. None of what had happened had changed that for me. But I couldn't shake the feeling that it wasn't meant to be. Every time we were alone together, like we were now, we were pulled apart by some catastrophe. It was a warning, at least to me, that this wasn't fate. Xender had put himself in my way, but we were both wrong about what we felt.

At least, I wanted to think that.

He kissed my neck, and I closed my eyes, tears welling in the corners and threatening to spill over my lashes. I was inches away from falling over the edge into love, and I hated it. This wasn't in my plans.

"Lene," he breathed against my skin, sending a ripple of gooseflesh up my arms. He wanted me as much as I wanted him.

I'd said now or never once before. I had to make a choice.

I turned to him, and his hand came up to caress the side of my face, his fingers tangling in my hair as he pulled me into a kiss.

I was a goner.

It was only a matter of moments before we were out of our sleeping bags. Xander was on top of me, kissing me deeply as his hands traveled the length of my sides, and hips.

I was somewhat distracted, however, by the nagging feeling that something bad was going to happen. What would it be this time? Would the roof cave in? Would the flesh flood wash the farm away? Would whatever creature that was lurking outside the boundary of the estate burst through the front door of the cottage?

"Lene?" Xander said against my lips, lowering himself on top of me and resting between my legs.

"I'm okay," I whispered, trying to push the doubt out of my mind as I reached up to run my fingers through his hair.

"Nothing's going to happen," he said before kissing my jaw, nudging my head to the side so he had access to my neck. "We're fine."

"Are you reading my mind?" I breathed, and he chuckled, planting a kiss behind my ear.

He set up and reached down to pull my shirt up over my head. I wasn't wearing a bra, but this time I didn't cower away from his gaze as he looked down at me. His c\*\*k was pressed against my thigh, and it twitched as his eyes roamed over my breasts. He looked, for just a moment, like an animal, about to lose control.

He held my gaze as he placed his hands over my breasts. His hands were incredibly warm against my chilled skin, and I sighed a little at the pleasure of it. But the noise I made did something to him, urged him on. It was as much as an invitation to continue as I could give. I was totally lost in the moment, his touch sending me over the edge into numbness, and bliss.

He toyed with my nipples, giving one of them a little flick. I sucked in my breath. It didn't hurt, not at all. I actually quite liked it.

I especially liked when he took the same nipple in his mouth; sucking, and running his tongue over the tip. A rush of warmth traveled down my belly, settling between my legs as I let out a little whimper.

He held me out of my pajama bottoms in an instant, leaving me totally exposed to him. He said nothing as he bent to kiss me, his parting my mouth with his tongue. I opened up to him, tangling my fingers in his hair and pulling him closer as the kiss intensified.

His hand was resting on my thigh, squeezing on occasion as he melted into our kiss. I was afraid I was going to hurt him, but I desperately wanted to touch him. I was itching to run my fingertips over his chest.

I jumped a little when his hand slid between my legs.

"It's alright," he whispered, kissing me deeply as he slid his finger through the wetness between my thighs. His thumb circled, then pressed gently on my clit, picking up speed as I moaned against his lips. "Do you like that?"

"Yes," I panted, my breathing in my throat as he continued to play with me, his fingers pushing me closer and closer to climax.

He was leaning over me, propped up on one elbow as his fingers began to move in and out of me. I gripped his shoulders, wordlessly begging for release, but he only smiled and nipped my earlobe.

"We're in no rush—"

"Please, Xander," I pleaded, arching my back and further opening myself to his touch.

He stopped long enough to take off his pants, his hard c\*\*k straining against my thigh as he continued to mercilessly tease me.

I could feel sweet beeding along my hairline as my desperation peaked.

"This might hurt," he whispered, then kissed me full and long, his forehead pressing into my as he positioned himself.

I said nothing. He kissed my temple, his fingers tangling in my hair as the head of his c\*\*k pressed against my folds. I had my eyes closed. My mouth was slightly open as I sucked in my breath when he pushed past the barrier, slowly, gently, taking his time.

"Lene, you're shaking," he breathed against my cheek.

I tried to nod, but I was suddenly overwhelmed by a jolt of pain as he pulled out of me, and then eased himself back in.

"I'm alright," I panted, looking up at him.

He was looking into my eyes, watching me as he pushed further, widening me and filling me up with his width. He gave one final slow, deliberate thrust, and then I was his.

I cried out, clutching his arms as he drew in his breath. The pain ebbed away as he began to move again, replaced by a fullness I hadn't expected.

I could tell he was holding back, trying to be as gentle as possible. His shoulders were rigid with tension as he gripped the pillow under my head with one hand, the other holding himself over me. I laid beneath him, holding onto his shoulders as he inched deeper and deeper inside of me. Feeling him inside me was doing something to my body. Every movement he made was sending ripples of warmth through my core.

"I don't want to hurt you," he said in a desperate whisper, lowering himself enough to rest his forehead against mine. He thrust into me with more enthusiasm, and it caught me off guard. Instead of pain, however, I felt my muscles tighten, and my hands came down to grip his sides as I tried to pull him deeper.

He groaned, shaking his head as his mouth met mine in a hungry, desperate kiss. He began to move in and out of me with vigor as he lowered himself on top of me, his arms embracing me and holding me close.

I brought one of my legs up, and rested my heel on his back. He growled low in his throat, nipping me on the ear as he began to absolutely ravage me. I was unaware of the pain at that point. All I could feel was him. He cupped my ass with one hand, driving it as deep as he could possibly go, and sent me right over the edge into absolute ecstasy.

"Xander!" I cried, my nails digging into his skin as he drove into me again and again.

"Come for me," he commended, panting as he rocked his hips into mine. "You're so f\*cking tight, f\*ck!" He gritted his teeth, breathing heavy as we both reached the climax at the exact same time.

I was in a haze as he pulled out and nearly collapsed on top of me. He wrapped his arms around me, then flipped us over so I was lying in the crook of his shoulder instead of beneath him. We laid like that for a long time, the only sounds in the room were our thundering heartbeats and heavy breaths.

"Did I hurt you?" he finally asked.

"No," I whispered. My body felt numb, fatigue creeping up my legs as I melted into him.

"It gets better," he breathed, his fingers tracing a circle on my hip bone.

I closed my eyes, falling asleep to the sound of his heart.

\*Lena\*

I wanted nothing more than to crawl into my sleeping bag and close my eyes. I was exhausted. I truly hadn't slept much at all over the past week. This was not at all how I'd envisioned my time spent on my field study.

I was meant to be researching the plant samples and soil, determining the best course of action for the area to not only improve their harvests but also gather information on the area's flora as a whole to add to my report that I was required to turn in to Morhan.

Instead, I found myself sitting on the edge of the bed I shared with Xander, unwinding his bandages.

"It looks so much better," I whispered, in awe of the abrupt change taking place on his skin. I'd expected the wound to be large based on the damage it had done to his body, but it was small, just a few teeth marks where the swelling had gone down.

"I'll get the sample we need," he said, closing his eyes as he laid back against his pillow with his hands behind his head, "while you're back on campus."

It wasn't a question. I knew pushing the subject would be fruitless.

"I need to put new bandages on you—"

"I'm fine for a minute. I've been wearing them all day."

I placed my hands in my lap, pursing my lips. Bethany had brought me a medical kit, but it didn't have the herbs and tinctures Henry's medkit possessed. It was obvious to me that Henry's medkit was for him, and him alone.



“Well,” I sighed, rising from the bed, “I’m going to read for a bit. I brought my textbooks on the medical uses of plants local to this area—”

“Lena, we’re both exhausted. Please, just sleep.”

“We need to know—”

“You’re not going to find what you’re looking for in those books.” His eyes were closed as he spoke, on the edge of sleep himself. “The bed’s warm. Lay down, okay?”

“Not until you have fresh bandages,” I protested.

He sighed deeply, then shrugged, which was invitation enough for me to get on with it. I grabbed the medical kit off the kitchenette counter and brought it back into the bedroom. I rifled through the contents, finding antibiotic ointment and several rolls of fresh bandages.

“I’m going to go wash my hands,” I said, looking down at the supplies to make sure I had everything I needed. Xander could easily do this himself, but I knew he wasn’t going to. He’d let the wound get infected again before he made a big deal out of it.

I did all the little things I needed to do in order to get ready for bed, brushed my teeth, then washed my hands thoroughly. By the time I’d changed into pajamas and my hands were so clean they were raw, I found Xander sitting up in bed, looking toward the window.

“Did you see something?” I asked as I came back into the room.

He shook his head, turning in my direction, his face void of expression. “Let’s get this over with,” he mumbled, his shoulders falling a bit as I stood in front of him, positioning myself between his knees as I bent to my task.

“This is going to scar. I think you should’ve gotten stitches, honestly.”

“No, thanks,” he said with a brief smile, then shook his head as if thinking of some long-forgotten memory. “I’ve never needed them.”

“Me neither,” I murmured as I rolled the bandage over his chest and back to hold the piece of ointment-soaked gauze over the wound in place.

“Why does talking about the royal family make you so uncomfortable?” he asked, abruptly changing the subject.

I blinked, then met his eye. “What do you mean?”

“Over dinner, when everyone was talking about the Princes of Poldesse.”

“It’s just gossip,” I replied, feeling a slight tightening in my stomach. I tucked the loose end of the bandage in place over his chest. “It’s all anyone wants to talk about.”

“Not you, though.”

“No, not me.”

“Do you know them?”

“Who?” I asked as I put the supplies back in the medkit, avoiding his gaze.

“The princes?”

I closed the medkit, chewing on the inside of my cheek. “Why would you think that?”

Xander was watching me closely, tilting his head to the side as I straightened up to my full height and looked in his direction.

“You looked a little defensive when Prince Oliver was mentioned.”

“I think his situation is sad, that’s all. It’s rude to speculate on what really happened and gossip about it.” I couldn’t hide the bite in my voice. My cheeks reddened as I scooped up the medical supplies, turning from the bed to set it on the dresser near the window.

“Why would you care?”

I felt uneasy as I turned back to him. I kept my face neutral as I walked to the opposite wall and turned out the light. Now, he couldn’t see the emotions playing over my face as I climbed into the bed and into my sleeping bag.

There was a moment of silence between us as we settled into our sleeping bags. I was lying flat on my back, staring at the ceiling when Xander turned to me, his arm tucked under his pillow.

“You know, the princess is rumored to be very powerful.”

“How would you even know that? No one has seen her in years.”

“Weird, right?”

“I already told you I thought it was rude to gossip about them,” I huffed, turning my head to lock eyes with him.

“It’s not gossip. Just... speculation.”

“What is there to even speculate about? Maybe she just doesn’t like being out in public and constantly ridiculed!”

“Is that what it’s like?”

I opened my mouth, but snapped it shut, narrowing my eyes at him. “You were the one who wanted to go to sleep, Xander.” I closed my eyes and began to turn away from him when I heard him chuckle.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing,” he said, shrugging his shoulders.

“Leave me alone,” I grumbled as I turned away from him, rustling my sleeping bag loudly just to be annoying.

“Fine,” he replied.

I lay there for a moment, opening my eyes to stare blankly at the wall. It was raining again, the sound of it reverberating through the room as it pounded against the metal roof.

Sleep was lost on me, yet again. I knew Xander was still awake. He was facing my back, the two of us only inches away from each other.

I heard his sleeping bag rustle, and then the bed creaked as he moved closer to me, effectively spooning himself around me while zipped up in his sleeping bag.

It felt nice; I was willing to admit that. His warmth was penetrating my sleeping bag, warming me from within. His arm came around me, pulling me closer, as he nuzzled his face against the back of my head.

"You're trying to annoy me," I whispered.

"I'm just getting comfortable. There's no room on here with the two of us unless we're touching."

He wasn't wrong, but still....

I felt his chest rise and fall, then he cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry about Jen. I know it hurt you."

"It's fine—"

"Not to me."

"We're not together, Xander."

"This feels pretty together to me," he whispered into my hair.

I felt a rush of desire as his breath tickled my neck.

I wanted him. None of what had happened had changed that for me. But I couldn't shake the feeling that it wasn't meant to be. Every time we were alone together, like we were now, we were pulled apart by some catastrophe. It was a warning, at least to me, that this wasn't fate. Xander had put himself in my way, but we were both wrong about what we felt.

At least, I wanted to think that.

He kissed my neck, and I closed my eyes, tears welling in the corners and threatening to spill over my lashes. I was inches away from falling over the edge into love, and I hated it. This wasn't in my plans.

"Lena," he breathed against my skin, sending a ripple of gooseflesh up my arms. He wanted me as much as I wanted him.

I'd said now or never once before. I had to make a choice.

I turned to him, and his hand came up to caress the side of my face, his fingers tangling in my hair as he pulled me into a kiss.

I was a goner.

It was only a matter of moments before we were out of our sleeping bags. Xander was on top of me, kissing me deeply as his hands traveled the length of my sides, and hips.

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whatever creature that was lurking outside the boundary of the estate burst through the front door of the cottage?

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“I’m okay,” I whispered, trying to push the doubt out of my mind as I reached up to run my fingers through his hair.

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“Are you reading my mind?” I breathed, and he chuckled, planting a kiss behind my ear.

He sat up and reached down to pull my shirt up over my head. I wasn’t wearing a bra, but this time I didn’t cower away from his gaze as he looked down at me. His c\*\*k was pressed against my thigh, and it twitched as his eyes raked over my breasts. He looked, for just a moment, like an animal, about to lose control.

He held my gaze as he placed his hands over my breasts. His hands were incredibly warm against my chilled skin, and I sighed a little at the pleasure of it. But the noise I made did something to him, urged him on. It was as much as an invitation to continue as I could give. I was totally lost in the moment, his touch sending me over the edge into numbness, and bliss.

He toyed with my n\*\*\*\*s, giving one of them a little flick. I sucked in my breath. It didn’t hurt, not at all. I actually quite liked it.

I especially liked when he took the same n\*\*\*\*e in his mouth; sucking, and running his tongue over the tip. A rush of warmth traveled down my belly, settling between my legs as I let out a little whimper.

He had me out of my pajama bottoms in an instant, leaving me totally exposed to him. He said nothing as he bent to kiss me, his parting my mouth with his tongue. I opened up to him, tangling my fingers in his hair and pulling him closer as the kiss intensified.

His hand was resting on my thigh, squeezing on occasion as he melted into our kiss. I was afraid I was going to hurt him, but I desperately wanted to touch him. I was aching to run my fingertips over his chest.

I jumped a little when his hand slid between my legs.

“It’s alright,” he whispered, kissing me deeply as he slid his finger through the wetness between my thighs. His thumb circled, then pressed gently on my clit, picking up speed as I moaned against his lips. “Do you like that?”

“Yes,” I panted, my breathing in my throat as he continued to play with me, his fingers pushing me closer and closer to climax.

He was leaning over me, propped up on one elbow as his fingers began to move in and out of me. I gripped his shoulders, wordlessly begging for release, but he only smiled and nipped my earlobe.

“We’re in no rush—”

“Please, Xander,” I pleaded, arching my back and further opening myself to his touch.

He stopped long enough to take off his pants, his hard c\*\*k straining against my thigh as he continued to mercilessly tease me.

I could feel sweat beading along my hairline as my desperation peaked.

“This might hurt,” he whispered, then kissed me full and long, his forehead pressing into my as he positioned himself.

I said nothing. He kissed my temple, his fingers tangling in my hair as the head of his c\*\*k pressed against my folds. I had my eyes closed. My mouth was slightly ajar as I sucked in my breath when he pushed past the barrier, slowly, gently, taking his time.

“Lena, you’re shaking,” he breathed against my cheek.

I tried to nod, but I was suddenly overwhelmed by a jolt of pain as he pulled out of me, and then eased himself back in.

“I’m alright,” I panted, looking up at him.

He was looking into my eyes, watching me as he pushed further, widening me and filling me up with his width. He gave one final slow, deliberate thrust, and then I was his.

I cried out, clutching his arms as he drew in his breath. The pain ebbed away as he began to move again, replaced by a fullness I hadn’t expected.

I could tell he was holding back, trying to be as gentle as possible. His shoulders were rigid with tension as he gripped the pillow under my head with one hand, the other holding himself over me. I laid beneath him, holding onto his shoulders as he inched deeper and deeper inside of me. Feeling him inside me was doing something to my body. Every movement he made was sending ripples of warmth through my core.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he said in a desperate whisper, lowering himself enough to rest his forehead against mine. He thrust into me with more enthusiasm, and it caught me off guard. Instead of pain, however, I felt my muscles tighten, and my hands came down to grip his sides as I tried to pull him deeper.

He groaned, shaking his head as his mouth met mine in a hungry, desperate kiss. He began to move in and out of me with vigor as he lowered himself on top of me, his arms embracing me and holding me close.

I brought one of my legs up, and rested my heel on his back. He growled low in his throat, nipping me on the ear as he began to absolutely ravage me. I was unaware of the pain at that point. All I could feel was him. He cupped my ass with one hand, driving as deep as he could possibly go, and sent me right over the edge into absolute ecstasy.

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“Come for me,” he commanded, panting as he rocked his hips into mine. “You’re so f\*cking tight, f\*ck!” He gritted his teeth, breathing heavy as we both reached the climax at the exact same time.

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Instead, I found myself sitting on the edge of the bed I shared with Xandar, unwinding his bandages.

"It looks so much better," I whispered, in awe of the abrupt change taking place on his skin. I'd expected the wound to be large based on the damage it had done to his body, but it was small, just a few teeth marks where the swelling had gone down.

"I'll get the sample wa naad," he said, closing his eyes as he laid back against his pillow with his hands behind his head, "while you're back on campus."

It wasn't a question. I knew pushing the subject would be fruitless.

"I need to put new bandages on you—"

"I'm fine for a minute. I've been waiting them all day."

I placed my hands in my lap, pursing my lips. Bathany had brought me a medical kit, but it didn't have the herbs and tinctures Henry's medical kit possessed. It was obvious to me that Henry's medical kit was for him, and him alone.

"Well," I sighed, rising from the bed, "I'm going to read for a bit. I brought my textbooks on the medical uses of plants local to this area—"

"Lana, we're both exhausted. Please, just sleep."

"We need to know—"

“You’re not going to find what you’re looking for in those books.” His eyes were closed as he spoke, on the edge of sleep himself. “The bed’s warm. Lay down, okay?”

“Not until you have fresh bandages,” I protested.

He sighed deeply, then shrugged, which was invitation enough for me to get on with it. I grabbed the medical kit off the kitchen counter and brought it back into the bedroom. I rifled through the contents, finding antibiotic ointment and several rolls of fresh bandages.

“I’m going to go wash my hands,” I said, looking down at the supplies to make sure I had everything I needed. Xandar could easily do this himself, but I knew he wasn’t going to. He’d let the wound get infected again before he made a big deal out of it.

I did all the little things I needed to do in order to get ready for bed, brushed my teeth, then washed my hands thoroughly. By the time I’d changed into pajamas and my hands were so clean they were raw, I found Xandar sitting up in bed, looking toward the window.

“Did you see something?” I asked as I came back into the room.

He shook his head, turning in my direction, his face void of expression. “Let’s get this over with,” he mumbled, his shoulders falling a bit as I stood in front of him, positioning myself between his knees as I bent to my task.

“This is going to scar. I think you should’ve gotten stitches, honestly.”

“No, thanks,” he said with a brief smile, then shook his head as if thinking of some long-forgotten memory. “I’ve never needed them.”

“Ma naithar,” I murmured as I rolled the bandage over his chest and back to hold the piece of ointment-soaked gauze over the wound in place.

“Why does talking about the royal family make you so uncomfortable?” he asked, abruptly changing the subject.

I blinked, then met his eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Over dinner, when everyone was talking about the Princess of Poldassa.”

“It’s just gossip,” I replied, feeling a slight tightening in my stomach. I tucked the loose end of the bandage in place over his chest. “It’s all anyone wants to talk about.”

“Not you, though.”

“No, not me.”

“Do you know them?”

“Who?” I asked as I put the supplies back in the medical kit, avoiding his gaze.

“The princess?”

I closed the medical kit, chewing on the inside of my cheek. “Why would you think that?”

Xandar was watching me closely, tilting his head to the side as I straightened up to my full height and looked in his direction.

"You looked a little defensive when Prince Olivar was mentioned."

"I think his situation is sad, that's all. It's rude to speculate on what really happened and gossip about it." I couldn't hide the bite in my voice. My cheeks reddened as I scooped up the medical supplies, turning from the bed to sit it on the dresser near the window.

"Why would you care?"

I felt uneasy as I turned back to him. I kept my face neutral as I walked to the opposite wall and turned out the light. Now, he couldn't see the emotions playing over my face as I climbed into the bed and into my sleeping bag.

There was a moment of silence between us as we settled into our sleeping bags. I was lying flat on my back, staring at the ceiling when Xandar turned to me, his arm tucked under his pillow.

"You know, the princess is rumored to be very powerful."

"How would you even know that? No one has seen her in years."

"Weird, right?"

"I already told you I thought it was rude to gossip about them," I huffed, turning my head to look away from him.

"It's not gossip. Just... speculation."

"What is there to even speculate about? Maybe she just doesn't like being out in public and constantly ridiculed!"

"Is that what it's like?"

I opened my mouth, but snapped it shut, narrowing my eyes at him. "You were the one who wanted to go to sleep, Xandar." I closed my eyes and began to turn away from him when I heard him chuckle.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing," he said, shrugging his shoulders.

"Leave me alone," I grumbled as I turned away from him, rustling my sleeping bag loudly just to be annoying.

"Fine," he replied.

I lay there for a moment, opening my eyes to stare blankly at the wall. It was raining again, the sound of it rattling through the room as it pounded against the metal roof.

Sleep was lost on me, yet again. I knew Xandar was still awake. He was facing my back, the two of us only inches away from each other.



I heard his slaaping bag rustla, and than tha bad craakad as ha movad closar to ma, affactivally spooning himself around ma whila zippad up in his slaaping bag.

It falt nica; I was willing to admit that. His warmth was panatrating my slaaping bag, warming ma from within. His arm cama around ma, pulling ma closar, as ha nuzzlad his faca against tha back of my haad.

“You’ra trying to annoy ma,” I whisparad.

“I’m just gattin comfortabla. Thara’s no room on hara with tha two of us unlass wa’ra touching.”

Ha wasn’t wrong, but still....

I falt his chast risa and fall, than ha claarad his throat.

“I’m sorry about Jan. I know it hurt you.”

“It’s fina—”

“Not to ma.”

“Wa’ra not togathar, Xandar.”

“This faals pratty togathar to ma,” ha whisparad into my hair.

I falt a rush of dasira as his braath ticklad my nack.

I wantad him. Nona of what had happenad had changad that for ma. But I couldn’t shaka tha faaling that it wasn’t maant to ba. Evary tima wa wara alona togathar, lika wa wara now, wa wara pullad apart by soma catastropha. It was a warning, at laast to ma, that this wasn’t fata. Xandar had put himself in my way, but wa wara both wrong about what wa falt.

At laast, I wantad to think that.

Ha kissad my nack, and I closad my ayas, taars walling in tha cornars and thraataning to spill ovar my lashas. I was inchas away from falling ovar tha adga into lova, and I hatad it. This wasn’t in my plans.

“Lana,” ha braathad against my skin, sanding a rippla of goosafash up my arms. Ha wantad ma as much as I wantad him.

I’d said now or navar onca bafora. I had to maka a choica.

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It was only a mattar of momants bafora wa wara out of our slaaping bags. Xandar was on top of ma, kissing ma daaply as his hands travalad tha langth of my sidas, and hips.

I was somawhat distractad, howavar, by tha nagging faaling that something bad was going to hannan. What would it ba this tima? Would tha roof cava in? Would a flash flood wash tha farm away? Would

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I jumped a little when his hand slid between my legs.

“It’s alright,” he whispered, kissing me deeply as he slid his finger through the wetness between my thighs. His thumb circled, then pressed gently on my clit, picking up speed as I moaned against his lips. “Do you like that?”

“Yes,” I panted, my breathing in my throat as he continued to play with me, his fingers pushing me closer and closer to climax.

He was leaning over me, propped up on one elbow as his fingers began to move in and out of me. I gripped his shoulders, wordlessly begging for release, but he only smiled and nipped my earlobe.

“Wa’ra in no rush—”

“Please, Xandar,” I pleaded, arching my back and further opening myself to his touch.

Ha stoppad long enough to taka off his pants, his hard c\*\*k straining against my thigh as ha continuad to marcilassly taasa ma.

I could faal swaat baading along my hairlina as my dasparation paakad.

“This might hurt,” ha whisparad, than kissad ma full and long, his forahaad prassing into my as ha positionad himsalf.

I said nothing. Ha kissad my tampla, his fingars tangling in my hair as tha haad of his c\*\*k prassad against my folds. I had my ayas closad. My mouth was slightly ajar as I suckad in my braath whan ha pushad past tha barrier, slowly, gantly, taking his tima.

“Lana, you’ra shaking,” ha braathad against my chaak.

I triad to nod, but I was suddanly ovarwhalmad by a jolt of pain as ha pullad out of ma, and than aasad himsalf back in.

“I’m alright,” I pantad, looking up at him.

Ha was looking into my ayas, watching ma as ha pushad furtar, widaning ma and filling ma up with his width. Ha gava ona final slow, dalibarata thrust, and than I was his.

I criad out, clutching his arms as ha draw in his braath. Tha pain abbad away as ha bagan to mova again, raplacad by a fullnass I hadn’t aexpectad.

I could tall ha was holding back, trying to ba as gantla as possibla. His shouldars wara rigid with tansion as ha grippad tha pillow undar my haad with ona hand, tha othar holding himsalf ovar ma. I laid banaath him, holding onto his shouldars as ha inchad daapar and daapar insida of ma. Faaling him insida ma was doing something to my body. Evary movamant ha mada was sanding riplas of warmth through my cora.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” ha said in a dasparata whispar, lowaring himsalf enough to rast his forahaad against mina. Ha thrust into ma with mora anthusias, and it caught ma off guard. Instaad of pain, howavar, I falt my musclas tightan, and my hands cama down to grip his sidas as I triad to pull him daapar.

Ha groanad, shaking his haad as his mouth mat mina in a hungry, dasparata kiss. Ha bagan to mova in and out of ma with vigor as ha lowarad himsalf on top of ma, his arms ambracing ma and holding ma closa.

I brought ona of my lags up, and rastad my haal on his back. Ha growlad low in his throat, nipping ma on tha aar as ha bagan to absolutaly ravaga ma. I was unawara of tha pain at that point. All I could faal was him. Ha cuppad my ass with ona hand, driving as daap as ha could possibly go, and sant ma right ovar tha adga into absoluta acstasy.

“Xandar!” I criad, my nails digging into his skin as ha drova into ma again and again.

“Coma for ma,” ha commandad, panting as ha rockad his hips into mina. “You’ra so f\*cking tight, f\*ck!” Ha grittad his taath, braathing haavy as wa both raachad tha climax at tha axact sama tima.

I was in a haze as he pulled out and nearly collapsed on top of me. He wrapped his arms around me, then flipped us over so I was lying in the crook of his shoulder instead of beneath him. We laid like that for a long time, the only sounds in the room were our thundering heartbeats and heavy breaths.

"Did I hurt you?" he finally asked.

"No," I whispered. My body felt numb, fatigue creeping up my legs as I melted into him.

"It gets better," he breathed, his fingers tracing a circle on my hip bone.

I closed my eyes, falling asleep to the sound of his heart.

\*Lena\*

I wanted nothing more than to crawl into my sleeping bag and close my eyes. I was exhausted. I truly hadn't slept much at all over the past week. This was not at all how I'd envisioned my time spent on my field study.

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 515

17 : Was This a Mistake?

\*Lena\*

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I wasn't sure how I felt as I rolled over in bed and looked at Xander's empty sleeping bag. I was sore, but that was given. I'd known what to expect in that regard. While my very private parents had been more reserved and conservative during my upbringing, not all of my family members had been. That, and living with roommates for three years, had given me a pretty clear expectation about how these things were supposed to go.

But I hadn't been prepared for what I'd feel like emotionally.

I was embarrassed and slightly ashamed of my behavior.

And Xander's absence made me realize I may have made a mistake.

I didn't have much time to dwell on my feelings, however. A shadow passed in front of the bedroom window, and then someone knocked on the front door. I got up and pulled on my pajama pants, having only redressed enough to cover my breasts and other bits before falling asleep, and walked out into the snug living area.

"You missed breakfast, and someone made cinnamon rolls," Elaine grinned as she stepped inside and handed me a plate she'd covered in foil. I smiled, thanking her as she produced a fork from her pocket.

I set down on the trunk to eat, while Elaine settled in the armchair. I was absolutely famished, and exceedingly grateful she'd thought of me.

"Whet're you up to todey?" I esked, sighing es I took enother bite. "These ere reelly good!"

"Owen mede them. He's not good for much outside of his beking skills," she teesed, crossing her legs.

I hedn't hed e single conversetion with the men in question, but he seemed nice enough, end wes just enother one of the meny seesonel workers who were present et Redcliffe estete.

"They kind of teste like... pumpkin?"

"Pumpkin icing," she nodded, shrugging her shoulders. "Speeking of pumpkins, thet's whet everyone is doing todey. The fell hervest starts next week, end the pumpkin petch is the most lebor-intensive pert of it. It's technically still the weekend, but we're getting e heed start. You wenne join?"

I couldn't reelly refuse. Maxwell hed put e peuse on our field study, end it wes likely Henry would dreg me out of the herb gerden if he ceught me down there. I nodded end set the remains of the cinnemon roll on the counter before going to chenge out of my pejemes.

Ten minutes leter, Eleine end I were welking through the grein field. The ferm wes truly expensive, end it took us e while on foot to reech the pumpkin petch. Several figures were milling about es we approched. They were cutting lerge, perfectly orange pumpkins from the vines end setting them in the beck of e treiler, which hooked up to the beck of Betheny's truck when it wes full.

"Where's Betheny?" one of the workers esked.

Eleine shrugged, weving her hend in dismissel.

"She went into the villege on en errend. She took Xender with her," she shouted in reply es I followed her into the petch.

I wes cerrying my toolbox, which housed e verietiy of gerdening tools I likely wouldn't need for this chore, but I felt better heveng them with me nonetheless. I plenned on getting e soil semple, regerdless of the rules.

"Xender went with her?" I esked, trying to keep my voice neutrel. I must heve feiled, because Eleine geve me e funny look es we decided on e section of ripe pumpkins end knelt in the soil to begin freeing them from the vines.

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"Whet's up with you?" Eleine grunted es she cut into e thick pumpkin vine. She sneped it with her hends, then exemined the pumpkin before looking up et me expectently.

"Nothing, just tired—"

"Oh please!" she protested, sheking her heed es she hecked into enother vine. "You look better rested then you heve since you errived. And... you heve e glow to your cheeks. Whet'd you end Xender get up to efter dinner lest night? We sew how he followed you—"

"Nothing," I said quickly, standing up with two pumpkins in my arms. They were heavy, but I wanted to get as far away from the conversation as I could.

Elaine followed me with her eyes as I hurried away, chuckling under her breath. I dumped my armful into the trailer and wiped my brow, looking up to see Maxwell Redcliffe walking down the hill toward the patch.

"I didn't think I'd find you out here," he said, his mouth stretching into a smile.

He was an odd man. I couldn't quite read his expression, but he was handsome when he smiled, at least. I straightened my back a little as he approached.

"I have nothing else to do," I said hotly.

He smirked, rolling his eyes away from mine as he looked out over the field. "Where's that partner of yours?" he asked.

"He went into the village with Betheny."

"Ah, of course he did," he replied, but not to me. It sounded more like he hadn't meant to say it out loud. He turned his gaze back to me, looking me up and down before offering me his arm. "I think it's time I showed you the manor. It's a short walk from here."

It hadn't been a question; it was a command.

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The Redcliffe Manor was one of the most impressive houses I'd ever seen. Every inch of the facade was covered in intricate designs and covered in thick, dark green vines that snaked up three stories toward the two impressive towers.

I tried not to gape up at the impressive stained-glass windows as I followed Maxwell along the path through the beautiful, but severely overgrown, front garden.

A butler answered the door and ushered us inside, and I felt incredibly underdressed in my grimy work clothes and apron as I stepped into the foyer.

Everything was dark wood with rich, red walls. It was incredibly warm, borderline hot in the house, though, especially when Maxwell motioned for me to follow him into a sitting room situated off the foyer. The hearth was absolutely blazing as I sat opposite him in a high-backed armchair, and I felt a little sweet and claustrophobic as the heat began to penetrate my clothing.

But Maxwell seemed relaxed, his skin staying the same, slightly pale color while my cheeks began to burn.

"A drink?" he asked.

"Goddess, yes," I murmured, tugging at my collar.

Within seconds, I had a glass of iced tea in front of me, and I drank it as quickly as was appropriate. The ice melted almost immediately, but it did cure the dryness in my throat.

Mexwell, however, was drinking something hot. It smelled odd, and was quite pungent, even though he was seated several feet away. He was eyeing me, tapping his finger against his teacup.

"So, Lene, whereabouts are you from?"

"Don't you have my file from Morhen?" I teased, taken aback at his lack of knowledge. Surely he received my student file before I arrived; that was the whole point. My file would have shown that my studies aligned with the needs of the farm, and held all of my personal information inside of it as well.

He set his empty teacup on the coffee table, eyeing me skeptically.

"People lie," he said, giving me a wry smile. I blushed, unable to stop myself. Maxwell had a strange, overwhelmingly charismatic aura about him. He was handsome, that was for sure. But there was something about his voice and the way his eyes bored into mine that sent an unusual thrill through my body as he held his tea cup in his hands.

A wave of heat washed over, and not from the hearth. I quickly changed the subject, wondering what the hell was the matter with me. "Henry said your family has lived here for centuries," I said, wishing I had more tea as my breath caught in my throat.

"Yes, he's correct in that regard."

He went on to tell me some interesting historical facts about the manor, and estate that it set on. I listened as intently as possible, feeling more and more like I was going to die of a heart stroke as a servant came in to put another log on the fire in ten minute intervals. It was not nearly cold enough outside to need such a fire, but I was a guest. Who was I to even comment about it?

Mexwell chatted for nearly half an hour while I sat in a stupor of conflicting emotions and overwhelming heat. It wasn't until a different servant came in with a kettle that I broke out of the haze.

She poured a black, fragrant liquid into his tea cup.

I recognized the smell immediately.

I suddenly felt the urge to run out of the house as quickly as I could, but found it impossible to move. Manners and sheer curiosity kept me in place, although my fingertips were prickling with adrenaline.

He was drinking blood root. I could smell it. That smell was burned into my mind forever.

Who was this man?

"Is there any news about the investigation?" I said hastily, adjusting my position in the chair.

"No," he said slowly, not meeting my eye, "but not to worry."

A servant came in, her voice flushed with concern as she bent to whisper into Maxwell's ear. He nodded, his eyes flashing with frustration as he set his teacup down and stood, offering me his hand.

"I have business to attend to," he said, and led me out of the sitting room. "I assume you know your way back to the fields?"

I didn't even have time to nod before he was off, walking at a brisk pace with his back straight and shoulders rigid with tension. I walked into the foyer, watching as he disappeared around the corner and out of sight completely.

But then I heard a scream of frustration, maybe even anger, come from somewhere above my head.

"His sister," said the butler, appearing before me like a ghost.

I flinched, my hand flying over my chest as I sucked in my breath. The butler was a kindly looking old man, however, who was staring blankly at me as I tried to bring my heartbreak back to normal.

"I didn't know—"

"She's ill, I'm afraid," he said, motioning toward the door.

"Is she alright?"

"Perfectly, Miss."

"She doesn't sound—"

The door closed in my face. I stood on the wrap-around front porch, gaping, my unspoken words falling from my mouth with no one to hear them but me. "She doesn't sound alright," I mumbled, tucking my hands in my pockets as I turned around and walked down the steps. I gave the house one last glance over my shoulder as I reached the wrought iron gate grown over with ivy.

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I was out of the truck before Bethany had even hit the brakes in front of the warehouse. I heard her voice, lifting in shock, as I jumped out and slammed the door, my hands clenched into fists at my sides as I stalked over to the dark haired man standing with his hands on his hips, talking to one of the farm workers.

But Elaine, who was walking out of the bunkhouse, got to him first.

"Ben! What're you doing up here?"

"Apple harvest," he said, passing her a basket of apples. "Think I can get one of those pumpkins?"

Elaine blushed a little in his direction, and I stopped in my tracks, thinking maybe I'd overreacted when Lene was talking to him in the bar. But I immediately changed my mind when Lene came out of the bunkhouse, her hair loose and flowing over her shoulders and back and looking radiant in the afternoon sun.

Ben noticed. He was looking right at her.

I'd claimed her as mine last night, and I meant to keep it that way.

"What are you doing here?" I said sharply.



Ben turned around, looking confused. Elaine fixed me with a dirty look, and Lene approached with a glare. I cleared my throat, but then decided to say nothing further.

“He’s dropping off some apples—”

“And seeing if you and Lene wanted to come out to the party tonight,” Ben said to Elaine.

Elaine blushed again, and I felt like even more of an idiot as I watched Ben return her gaze. But his eyes flicked back to Lene, and another pang of jealousy gripped my chest.

“Well, what do you say, Lene? It might make for a long day tomorrow?” Elaine directed this at Lene, but glanced at me, her eyes willing me to say something to challenge her.

I bit my tongue. I liked Elaine, but I could tell she had a mean streak lying dormant.

“Why not?” Lene grinned, looking relieved at the idea of a break from the farm.

“Cool, uh, we can all fit in my truck. Uh, Xander, right?” Ben turned to me, and I knew he damn well knew my name.

“Yeah?”

“You can come too, if you want. Unless you’re busy—”

“No,” I said, looking around the group.

Lene’s face fell.

I turned on my heel and walked toward the warehouse.

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Xander wasn’t there when I woke the next morning. I was somewhat grateful for it.

I wasn’t sure how I felt as I rolled over in bed and looked at Xander’s empty sleeping bag. I was sore, but that was a given. I’d known what to expect in that regard. While my very private parents had been more reserved and conservative during my upbringing, not all of my family members had been. That, and living with roommates for three years, had given me a pretty clear expectation about how these things were supposed to go.

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“You missed breakfast, and someone made cinnamon rolls,” Elaine grinned as she stepped inside and handed me a plate she’d covered in foil. I smiled, thanking her as she produced a fork from her pocket.

I sat down on the trunk to eat, while Elaine settled in the armchair. I was absolutely famished, and exceedingly grateful she'd thought of me.

"What're you up to today?" I asked, sighing as I took another bite. "These are really good!"

"Owen made them. He's not good for much outside of his baking skills," she teased, crossing her legs.

I hadn't had a single conversation with the man in question, but he seemed nice enough, and was just another one of the many seasonal workers who were present at Radcliffe estate.

"They kind of taste like... pumpkin?"

"Pumpkin icing," she nodded, shrugging her shoulders. "Speaking of pumpkins, that's what everyone is doing today. The fall harvest starts next week, and the pumpkin patch is the most labor-intensive part of it. It's technically still the weekend, but we're getting a head start. You wanna join?"

I couldn't really refuse. Maxwell had put a pause on our field study, and it was likely Henry would drag me out of the herb garden if he caught me down there. I nodded and set the remains of the cinnamon roll on the counter before going to change out of my pajamas.

Ten minutes later, Elaine and I were walking through the grain field. The farm was truly expansive, and it took us a while on foot to reach the pumpkin patch. Several figures were milling about as we approached. They were cutting large, perfectly orange pumpkins from the vines and setting them in the back of a trailer, which hooked up to the back of Bethany's truck when it was full.

"Where's Bethany?" one of the workers asked.

Elaine shrugged, waving her hand in dismissal.

"She went into the village on an errand. She took Xander with her," she shouted in reply as I followed her into the patch.

I was carrying my toolbox, which housed a variety of gardening tools I likely wouldn't need for this chore, but I felt better having them with me nonetheless. I planned on getting a soil sample, regardless of the rules.

"Xander went with her?" I asked, trying to keep my voice neutral. I must have failed, because Elaine gave me a funny look as we decided on a section of ripe pumpkins and knelt in the soil to begin freeing them from the vines.

"In a hurry. He was early for breakfast. The coffee hadn't even been brewed when he came to the bunkhouse, and when Bethany mentioned she was going to the village he jumped up, knocked his chair right over. They were gone in a flash."

"Weird," I mumbled, my face prickling with heat. Had he been trying to avoid... me?

"What's up with you?" Elaine grunted as she cut into a thick pumpkin vine. She snapped it with her hands, then examined the pumpkin before looking up at me expectantly.

"Nothing, just tired—"

“Oh please!” she protested, shaking her head as she hacked into another vine. “You look better rested than you have since you arrived. And... you have a glow to your cheeks. What’d you and Xander get up to after dinner last night? We saw how he followed you—”

“Nothing,” I said quickly, standing up with two pumpkins in my arms. They were heavy, but I wanted to get as far away from the conversation as I could.

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“He went into the village with Bethany.”

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“Why not?” Lena grinned, looking relieved at the idea of a break from the farm.

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“Yeah?”

“You can come too, if you want. Unless you’re busy—”

“No,” I said, looking around the group.

Lena’s face fell.

I turned on my heel and walked toward the warehouse.

\*Lena\*

Xander wasn’t there when I woke the next morning. I was somewhat grateful for it.

\*Lana\*

Xandar wasn’t thara whan I woka tha naxt morning. I was somawhat grataful for it.

I wasn’t sura how I falt as I rollad ovar in bad and lookad at Xandar’s ampty slaaping bag. I was sora, but that was a givan. I’d known what to axpact in that ragard. Whila my vary privata parants had baan mora rasarvad and consarvativa during my upbringing, not all of my family mambars had baan. That, and living with roommatas for thraa yaars, had givan ma a pratty claar axpactation about how thasa things wara supposad to go.

But I hadn’t baan preparad for what I’d faal lika amotionally.

I was ambarassad and slightly ashamad of my bahavior.

And Xandar’s absanca mada ma raaliza I may hava mada a mistaka.

I didn’t hava much tima to dwell on my faalings, howavar. A shadow passad in front of tha badroom window, and than somaona knockad on tha front door. I got up and pullad on my pajama pants, having

only radrassad enough to cover my braasts and othar bits bafora falling aslaap, and walkad out into the snug living araa.

“You missad braakfast, and somaona mada cinnamon rolls,” Elaina grinnad as sha stappad insida and handad ma a plata sha’d covarad in foil. I smilad, thanking har as sha producad a fork from har pockat.

I sat down on the trunk to aat, whila Elaina sattlad in the armchair. I was absolutaly famishad, and axcaadingly grataful sha’d thought of ma.

“What’ra you up to today?” I askad, sighing as I took another bita. “Thasa ara raally good!”

“Owan mada tham. Ha’s not good for much outside of his baking skills,” sha taasad, crossing har lags.

I hadn’t had a singla conversation with the man in quastion, but ha saamad nica enough, and was just another ona of the many saasonal workars who wara prasant at Radcliffa astata.

“Thay kind of tasta lika... pumpkin?”

“Pumpkin icing,” sha noddad, shrugging har shouldars. “Spaaking of pumpkins, that’s what avaryona is doing today. The fall harvast starts naxt waak, and the pumpkin patch is the most labor-intansiva part of it. It’s tachnically still the waakand, but wa’ra gattin a haad start. You wanna join?”

I couldn’t raally rafusa. Maxwell had put a pausa on our fiold study, and it was likaly Henry would drag ma out of the harb gardan if ha caught ma down thara. I noddad and sat the remains of the cinnamon roll on the countar bafora going to changa out of my pajamas.

Tan minutos later, Elaina and I wara walking through the grain fiold. The farm was truly xpansiva, and it took us a whila on foot to raach the pumpkin patch. Savaral figuras wara milling about as wa approachad. Thay wara cutting larga, parfactly oranga pumpkins from the vinas and satting tham in the back of a trailer, which hookad up to the back of Bathany’s truck whan it was full.

“Whara’s Bathany?” ona of the workars askad.

Elaina shruggad, waving har hand in dismissal.

“Sha want into the villaga on an arrand. Sha took Xandar with har,” sha shoutad in raply as I followad har into the patch.

I was carrying my toolbox, which housad a variaty of gardaning tools I likaly wouldn’t naad for this chora, but I falt battar having tham with ma nonathalass. I plannad on gattin a soil sampla, ragardlass of the rulas.

“Xandar want with har?” I askad, trying to kaap my voica neutral. I must hava failad, bacausa Elaina gava ma a funny look as wa dacidad on a saction of ripa pumpkins and knalt in the soil to bagin fraaing tham from the vinas.

“In a hurry. Ha was aarly for braakfast. The coffaa hadn’t avan baan brawad whan ha cama to the bunkhousa, and whan Bathany mantionad sha was going to the villaga ha jumpad up, knockad his chair right ovar. Thay wara gona in a flash.”

“Waird,” I mumblad, my faca prickling with haat. Had ha baan trying to avoid... ma?

“What’s up with you?” Elaina grunted as she cut into a thick pumpkin vina. She snapped it with her hands, then examined the pumpkin before looking up at me expectantly.

“Nothing, just tired—”

“Oh please!” she protested, shaking her head as she hacked into another vina. “You look better rested than you have since you arrived. And... you have a glow to your cheeks. What’d you and Xandar get up to after dinner last night? We saw how he followed you—”

“Nothing,” I said quickly, standing up with two pumpkins in my arms. They were heavy, but I wanted to get as far away from the conversation as I could.

Elaina followed me with her eyes as I hurried away, chuckling under her breath. I dumped my armful into the trailer and wiped my brow, looking up to see Maxwell Radcliffe walking down the hill toward the patch.

“I didn’t think I’d find you out here,” he said, his mouth stretching into a smile.

He was an odd man. I couldn’t quite read his expression, but he was handsome when he smiled, at least. I straightened my back a little as he approached.

“I have nothing else to do,” I said hotly.

He smirked, rolling his eyes away from me as he looked out over the field. “Whose is that partner of yours?” he asked.

“He went into the village with Bathany.”

“Ah, of course he did,” he replied, but not to me. It sounded more like he hadn’t meant to say it out loud. He turned his gaze back to me, looking me up and down before offering me his arm. “I think it’s time I showed you the manor. It’s a short walk from here.”

It hadn’t been a question; it was a command.

\*\*\*

The Radcliffe Manor was one of the most impressive houses I’d ever seen. Every inch of the facade was carved in intricate designs and covered in thick, dark green vines that snaked up three stories toward the two impressive towers.

I tried not to gape up at the impressive stained-glass windows as I followed Maxwell along the path through the beautiful, but savagely overgrown, front garden.

A butler answered the door and ushered us inside, and I felt incredibly underdressed in my grimy work clothes and apron as I stepped into the foyer.

Everything was dark wood with rich, red walls. It was incredibly warm, bordering on hot in the house, though, especially when Maxwell motioned for me to follow him into a sitting room situated off the foyer. The hearth was absolutely blazing as I sat opposite him in a high-backed armchair, and I felt a little sweaty and claustrophobic as the heat began to penetrate my clothing.



But Maxwell saamad relaxad, his skin staying tha sama, slightly pala color whila my chaaks began to burn.

“A drink?” ha askad.

“Goddass, yas,” I murmurad, tugging at my collar.

Within saconds, I had a glass of icad taa in front of ma, and I drank it as quickly as was appropriata. Tha ica maltad almost immadiataly, but it did cura tha drynass in my throat.

Maxwall, howavar, was drinking somathing hot. It smallad odd, and was quita pungant, avan though ha was saatad savaral faat away. Ha was ayaing ma, tapping his fingar against his taacup.

“So, Lana, wharaabouts ara you from?”

“Don’t you hava my fila from Morhan?” I taasad, takan aback at his lack of knowladga. Suraly ha racaivad my studant fila bafora I arrivad; that was tha whola point. My fila would hava shown that my studias alignad with tha naads of tha farm, and had all of my parsonal information insida of it as wall.

Ha sat his ampty taacup on tha coffaa tabla, ayaing ma skaptically.

“Paopla lia,” ha said, giving ma a wry smila. I blushad, unabla to stop myself. Maxwell had a stranga, ovarwhalmingly charismatic aura about him. Ha was handsoma, that was for sura. But thara was

somathing about his voica and tha way his ayas borad into mina that sant an unusual thrill through my body as ha hald his taa cup in his hands.

A wava of haat washad ovar, and not from tha haarth. I quickly changad tha subject, wondaring what tha hall was tha mattar with ma. “Henry said your family has livad hara for canturias,” I said, wishing I had mora taa as my braath caught in my throat.

“Yas, ha’s corract in that ragard.”

Ha want on to tall ma soma intarasting historical facts about tha manor, and astata that it sat on. I listanad as intantly as possibla, faaling mora and mora lika I was going to dia of haat stroka as a sarvant cama in to put another log on tha fira in tan minuta intervals. It was not naarly cold enough outsida to naad such a fira, but I was a guast. Who was I to avan commant about it?

Maxwall chattad for naarly half an hour whila I sat in a stupor of conflicting amotions and ovarwhalming haat. It wasn’t until a diffarant sarvant cama in with a kattla that I broka out of tha haza.

Sha pourad a black, fragrant liquid into his taa cup.

I racognizad tha small immadiataly.

I suddanly falt tha urga to run out of tha housa as quickly as I could, but found it impossibla to mova. Mannars and shaar curiosity kapt ma in placa, although my fingartips wara prickling with adranalina.

Ha was drinking blood root. I could small it. That small was burnad into my mind foravar.

Who was this man?

“Is thara any naws about tha invastigation?” I said hastily, adjusting my position in tha chair.

“No,” ha said slowly, not maating my aya, “but not to worry.”

A sarvant cama in, har voica flushad with concern as sha bant to whispas into Maxwell’s aar. Ha noddad, his ayas flashing with frustration as ha sat his taacup down and stood, offering ma his hand.

“I hava businass to attand to,” ha said, and lad ma out of tha sitting room. “I assumma you know your way back to tha fialds?”

I didn’t avan hava tima to nod bafora ha was off, walking at a brisk paca with his back straight and shouldars rigid with tansion. I walkad into tha foyar, watching as ha disappaarad around a cornar and out of sight complatally.

But than I haard a scream of frustration, mayba avan angar, coma from somawhara abova my haad.

“His sistar,” said tha butlar, appaaring bafora ma lika a ghost.

I flinchad, my hand flying ovar my chast as I suckad in my braath. Tha butlar was a kindly looking old man, howavar, who was staring blankly at ma as I triad to bring my haartbraak back to normal.

“I didn’t know—”

“Sha’s ill, I’m afraid,” ha said, motioning toward tha door.

“Is sha alright?”

“Parfactly, Miss.”

“Sha doasn’t sound—”

Tha door closad in my faca. I stood on tha wrap-around front porch, gaping, my unsaid words falling from my mouth with no ona to haar tham but ma. “Sha doasn’t sound alright,” I mumblad, tucking my hands in my pockats as I turnad around and walkad down tha staps. I gava tha housa ona last glanca ovar my shouldar as I raachad tha wrought iron gata grown ovar with ivy.

\*\*\*

\*Xandar\*

I was out of tha truck bafora Bathany had avan hit tha brakas in front of tha warahousa. I haard har voica, lifting in shock, as I jumpad out and slammad tha door, my hands clanchad into fists at my sidas as I stalkad ovar to tha dark hairad man standing with his hands on his hips, talking to ona of tha farm workars.

But Elaina, who was walking out of tha bunkhousa, got to him first.

“Ban! What’ra you doing up hara?”

“Appla harvast,” ha said, passing har a baskat of applas. “Think I can gat ona of thosa pumpkins?”

Elaina blushad a littla in his diraction, and I stoppad in my tracks, thinking mayba I’d ovarraactad whan Lana was talking to him in tha bar. But I immadiatly changad my mind whan Lana cama out of tha bunkhousa, har hair loosa and flowing ovar har shouldars and back and looking radiata in tha afternoon sun.

Ban noticed. He was looking right at her.

I'd claimed her as mine last night, and I meant to keep it that way.

"What are you doing here?" I said sharply.

Ban turned around, looking confused. Elaine fixed me with a dirty look, and Lana approached with a glare. I cleared my throat, but then decided to say nothing further.

"He's dropping off some apples—"

"And seeing if you and Lana wanted to come out to a party tonight," Ban said to Elaine.

Elaine blushed again, and I felt like a damn idiot as I watched Ban return her gaze. But his eyes flicked back to Lana, and another pang of jealousy gripped my chest.

"Well, what do you say, Lana? It might make for a long day tomorrow?" Elaine directed this at Lana, but glanced at me, her eyes willing me to say something to challenge her.

I bit my tongue. I liked Elaine, but I could tell she had a mean streak lying dormant.

"Why not?" Lana grinned, looking relieved at the idea of a break from the farm.

"Cool, uh, we can all fit in my truck. Uh, Xandar, right?" Ban turned to me, and I knew he damn well knew my name.

"Yeah?"

"You can come too, if you want. Unless you're busy—"

"No," I said, looking around the group.

Lana's face fell.

I turned on my heel and walked toward the warehouse.

\*Lena\*

Xander wasn't there when I woke the next morning. I was somewhat grateful for it.

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 516

\*Lena\*

Ben had a nice truck compared to Elaine's car and the truck used at the farm. There weren't many people with cars, and trains and boats still overwhelmed the need for vehicular transportation. But Crimson Creek was definitely one of those places where a car was necessary to get around with its narrow, bumpy gravel roads that weaved up and over the hills. It was my first time being out in the hills outside of the estate, other than the quick drive from the estate to town.

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I'd have been lying if I said it didn't make me nervous, but Elaine and Ben seemed unbothered by it.

The sky was dark, clear, and full of stars when we finally reached the party Ben had invited us to.

We pulled up to a lake, which I found rather shocking at first because it was smack dab in the middle of nowhere, so far from town I couldn't even see the lights.

At least three dozen people around my age were gathered around a large bonfire at the lake's edge, a radio sitting on a picnic table playing music as everyone drank cheap beer. It almost felt like I was back on Morhen's campus again.

"Now, this is a party," Elaine squeaked with joy, swaying her body to the music as she linked her arm in mine. "I'm glad this weekend wasn't a total bust!"

Ben looked back at us with a grin as we followed him down to the lake. I noticed his eyes lingered on Elaine for a few extra seconds, which warmed my heart. I'd noticed the way he looked at her when we were back at the farm.

I wondered if Xander had noticed it, but I doubted it. He was too busy looking incredibly cold and glaring at Ben.

It was clear to me that Ben had little interest in me. He was likely just being nice in order to get closer to Elaine. I was totally fine with that, especially when Ben brought us some drinks, and I noticed the look of longing flesh behind Elaine's eyes.

"What's this place called?" I asked Ben, motioning toward the water.

The bonfire reflected off the surface of the lake, giving it an odd red color. I wanted to see what it looked like in the daytime because I was guessing it wasn't the clear, blue water I was used to back home.

"Crimson Lake," he said with a shrug. "The original settlers weren't all that creative."

"Crimson Creek, like the actual creek, feeds into it," Elaine added, waving her hand toward the north.

"Oh," I said, not entirely sure what else to contribute to the conversation. Ben and Elaine were chatting while I clutched a can of warm beer. I hadn't even opened it and was more than happy to just hang out by the fire and people-watch.

I found it odd that so many young people lived in Crimson Creek. It was an old place, with little to no infrastructure and few opinions in terms of education or employment. In fact, I noticed something unusual as I continued to scan the crowd and felt a jolt of unease shoot through me.

There was a group of people standing away from the fire. They were huddled together, whispering to each other and glancing in my direction every once in a while. They were dressed in heavy winter

clothing—perkes, boots, end hets. They looked out of place, especially since it was e rere werm end dry evening.

One men in perticular was stering et me, his geze ocasionally flicking in Eleine’s direction. I noticed him move his geze to Ben, his eyes narrowing es he sized him up.

“Don’t worry about those guys,” Ben seid, tilting his heed towerd the group. “They look rough, but they’re not. I know them.”

“Thet guy on the left keeps looking et ell of us,” I seid, wondering if my enxiety was werrented.

“His neme is Cleus. He’s just e strenge guy, that’s ell.”

“But—”

“Hey, is thet Betheny?” Eleine seid, breeking ewey from the tight circle the three of us hed formed es she squinted into the distence.

I stepped around her, seeing the ferm truck meking its wey down the hill towerd the leke. It wesn’t Betheny who got out of the truck.

It wes Xender.

\*\*\*

Xender wes meking his wey over to me through the crowd. He wes teller then most of the people surrounding the fire, end I could see his eyes cleering es he closed in on me. He hed his usuel look of merked disapproval on his fece.

“Greet,” I huffed, crossing my erms over my chest.

“I knew he’d come!” Eleine giggled, nudging my shoulder.

Ben shifted his weight, looking e little uncomfortable es Xender approeched. Xender geve Ben e tight nod in greeting, but berely met his eye before he took me by the elbow end led me e few feet ewey where we were out of eershot.

“I thought you didn’t went to come,” I murmured.

He looked down et me, rolling his eyes es he took whet looked like the first deep breeth he’d taken in e while. “I didn’t know where the perty wes. Someone mentioned the leke et dinner.”

“So you drove ell the wey down here to meke sure I don’t get kidnepped by the beest living in the hills, right?” I seid sercestically, but Xender didn’t answer. He wes stering et the seme men who’d been eyeing me end Eleine eerlier. “Ben seys he knows him—”

“Sure he does,” Xender seid beneath his breeth, narrowing his eyes et the strenger until the men turned beck to his group. Xender crossed his erms over his chest, keeping his eye on the group for whet felt like several minutes. It wes sterting to meke me uncomfortable.

“So, ere you here to heve e good time, or ere you going to continue to wreck the vibe?”

He turned to me, looking down at me with a severe look on his face.

"I'm not wrecking the vibe, Lene."

"What would you call it then?"

He reached up and pinched the bridge of his nose like he had a headache, then sighed, reaching out to take the unopened beer out of my hands. He cracked it open and finished it in two swallows before tossing it a remarkable distance into the bonfire.

It didn't seem to change his mood, however. He was still looking around, his eyes lined with suspicion.

Something had changed in him over the past twenty-four hours. I'd felt it when I woke up in the morning, alone, after we'd had s\*x. It was like he was pulling away from me.

He'd gotten what he wanted. Maybe that was all it was.

"You okay?" he asked.

I looked up at him. "I'm fine."

He held my gaze for a moment, then looked away, his shoulders going rigid as he looked back over the crowd.

"Hey!" Elaine said, walking in our direction as she dragged an apprehensive-looking Ben behind her. "We're going to dance. You should come!"

I looked past her at a large group of people who had started dancing to music coming from one of the vehicles on the other side of the bonfire, their bodies lit up by the ember light coming off the flames. I nodded in agreement, glancing over at Xander as he continued to look around.

"What's his problem?" Elaine grumbled as I walked in step with her.

I shrugged. "I don't know, I think this is just what he's like."

"Well, Ben has friends who are fun, and like to dance, so don't let him ruin your night. You have to go back to Morhen for a bit, I hear? When do you leave?"

"Two days, I think. Henry gives me a different answer every time—" I bit my lip as Elaine squealed, swept into the crowd of dancers by Ben. I was left standing on the edge of the group, alone.

"Do you want to dance?" Xander said, coming up behind me.

"Do you?"

He looked down at me, and I saw a brief hint of a smile touch his cheek. He offered me my hand, but I hesitated.

"I'd like to dance with you, Lene," he said, tilting his head as he searched my face.

I took his hand, biting the inside of my cheek to stop myself from asking the questions that had been nagging me all day.

Soon we were in the swell of people, my hands on his shoulders. I felt a little awkward as I moved against him. I hadn't had many opportunities to dance. I'd taken ballet, but only when I was a child, and I hadn't been a great student.

"Just move with me," Xander said, leaning down to talk into my ear. "You're stiff."

His breath tickled my skin as he pulled me closer, his hand resting on my lower back. I was instantly comforted by his touch. I wished I wasn't.

"I had tea at the manor today," I said into his chest, wondering if he could even hear me over the music. He stiffened a little.

"And?"

"Maxwell was perfectly nice. But... the house is strange. It had to be close to one-hundred degrees in there. And, he—he has a sister."

"A sister? I thought Henry said Maxwell was the only one living at the manor?"

"Yeah, so did I. But someone was screaming upstairs when I was making my way out. The butler apologized for it, saying his sister was ill. He shut the door in my face before I could ask any other questions."

The hand that Xander had pressed against my back tightened a little as his fingers curled into a fist. He didn't respond, however. Instead, we just moved to the music.

But my feelings were overwhelming me. We hadn't had a chance to talk about the night before. He hadn't mentioned anything about it.

"Xander," I said, taking the risk and hoping I wouldn't regret it.

"Yeah?"

"Why didn't you say anything to me this morning—"

"I didn't want to wake you. You were fast asleep when I left for the bunkhouse."

"Oh," I said, wondering once again if he had the ability to read my mind, or if it was just that my heavy emotions were showing on my face. "Xander I think... maybe we shouldn't do this. This complicates things—"

"Complicates your field study?"

"Our field—"

"Is that truly all you care about?" he asked, his voice slightly cold.

I winced, trying desperately to organize my thoughts. "I don't know what you want from me."

"I want a lot more of you, Lene."

"That's not possible," I choked. I could feel the tears beginning to well in the corners of my eyes. I hated that I couldn't tell him the real reason. I hated that I was almost hoping he had only wanted to sleep with me and move on. It would have made this so, so much easier.

"One day," he began, taking a deep breath, "you're going to open your eyes and realize there's a lot more for you out there, Lene. For Goddess's sake, aren't you tired of pretending?"

I looked up at him, "What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean. I want you, okay? I want you in my bed tonight. I want you in my bed the night after that, and after that. Do you understand? Is that enough for you?"

"Xander—"

"Or are you going to continue to lie, and bury your feelings, and focus wholly on a singular area in your life where you have the utmost control?"

"Wait—"

"Who are you, Lene?" he said, pulling away from me.

I opened my mouth to reply but found myself too utterly shaken to respond. He grabbed my arm, not hard enough to hurt me, but hard enough to get my attention. He leaned down, his breath tickling my ears as he spoke. "Do you know why I came here?"

"Because you felt bad about my—"

"No," he growled. "I wanted to know you. I had to. You caught my eye every single f\*cking day on campus, and I needed to know—"

"Don't say it," I said calmly, closing my eyes.

This wasn't in my plans. This wasn't what I needed, or wanted, to happen. If he told me he thought I might be his mate, I'm not sure what I'd do. Slete had told me the same thing, but that had been different. I hadn't wanted Slete. I hadn't been desperate, and willing, to pave out a future with Slete; my responsibilities and expectations be damned.

Xander was putting me in an impossible situation. I would break both of our hearts, and I couldn't tell him why.

"I want to go home," I whispered as tears began to slide down my cheeks.

He looked down at me, his eyes flaming with frustration. But then he swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing as he exhaled.

"Come on," he said, leading me through the crowd and back to the farm truck. "We'll talk about this when you get back from Morhen."

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One man in particular was staring at me, his gaze occasionally flicking in Elaine's direction. I noticed him move his gaze to Ben, his eyes narrowing as he sized him up.

"Don't worry about those guys," Ben said, tilting his head toward the group. "They look rough, but they're not. I know them."

"That guy on the left keeps looking at all of us," I said, wondering if my anxiety was warranted.

"His name is Claus. He's just a strange guy, that's all."

"But—"

"Hey, is that Bethany?" Elaine said, breaking away from the tight circle the three of us had formed as she squinted into the distance.

I stepped around her, seeing the farm truck making its way down the hill toward the lake. It wasn't Bethany who got out of the truck.

It was Xander.

\*\*\*

Xander was making his way over to me through the crowd. He was taller than most of the people surrounding the fire, and I could see his eyes clearing as he closed in on me. He had his usual look of marked disapproval on his face.

"Great," I huffed, crossing my arms over my chest.

"I knew he'd come!" Elaine giggled, nudging my shoulder.

Ben shifted his weight, looking a little uncomfortable as Xander approached. Xander gave Ben a tight nod in greeting, but barely met his eye before he took me by the elbow and led me a few feet away where we were out of earshot.

"I thought you didn't want to come," I murmured.

He looked down at me, rolling his eyes as he took what looked like the first deep breath he'd taken in a while. "I didn't know where the party was. Someone mentioned the lake at dinner."

"So you drove all the way down here to make sure I don't get kidnapped by the beast living in the hills, right?" I said sarcastically, but Xander didn't answer. He was staring at the same man who'd been eyeing me and Elaine earlier. "Ben says he knows him—"

"Sure he does," Xander said beneath his breath, narrowing his eyes at the stranger until the man turned back to his group. Xander crossed his arms over his chest, keeping his eye on the group for what felt like several minutes. It was starting to make me uncomfortable.

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“We're going to dance. You should come!”

I looked past her at a large group of people who had started dancing to music coming from one of the vehicles on the other side of the bonfire, their bodies lit up by the amber light coming off the flames. I nodded in agreement, glancing over at Xander as he continued to look around.

“What's his problem?” Elaine grumbled as I walked in step with her.

I shrugged. “I don't know, I think this is just what he's like.”

“Well, Ben has friends who are fun, and like to dance, so don't let him ruin your night. You have to go back to Morhan for a bit, I hear? When do you leave?”

“Two days, I think. Henry gives me a different answer every time—” I bit my lip as Elaine squealed, swept into the crowd of dancers by Ben. I was left standing on the edge of the group, alone.

“Do you want to dance?” Xander said, coming up behind me.

“Do you?”

He looked down at me, and I saw a brief hint of a smile touch his cheek. He offered me my hand, but I hesitated.

“I'd like to dance with you, Lena,” he said, tilting his head as he searched my face.

I took his hand, biting the inside of my cheek to stop myself from asking the questions that had been nagging me all day.

Soon we were in the swell of people, my hands on his shoulders. I felt a little awkward as I moved against him. I hadn't had many opportunities to dance. I'd taken ballet, but only when I was a child, and I hadn't been a great student.

“Just move with me,” Xander said, leaning down to talk into my ear. “You’re stiff.”

His breath tickled my skin as he pulled me closer, his hand resting on my lower back. I was instantly comforted by his touch. I wished I wasn’t.

“I had tea at the manor today,” I said into his chest, wondering if he could even hear me over the music. He stiffened a little.

“And?”

“Maxwell was perfectly nice. But... the house is strange. It had to be close to one-hundred degrees in there. And, he—he has a sister.”

“A sister? I thought Henry said Maxwell was the only one living at the manor?”

“Yeah, so did I. But someone was screaming upstairs when I was making my way out. The butler apologized for it, saying his sister was ill. He shut the door in my face before I could ask any other questions.”

The hand that Xander had pressed against my back tightened a little as his fingers curled into a fist. He didn’t respond, however. Instead, we just moved to the music.

But my feelings were overwhelming me. We hadn’t had a chance to talk about the night before. He hadn’t mentioned anything about it.

“Xander,” I said, taking a risk and hoping I wouldn’t regret it.

“Yeah?”

“Why didn’t you say anything to me this morning—”

“I didn’t want to wake you. You were fast asleep when I left for the bunkhouse.”

“Oh,” I said, wondering once again if he had the ability to read my mind, or if it was just that my heavy emotions were showing on my face. “Xander I think... maybe we shouldn’t do this. This complicates things—”

“Complicates your field study?”

“Our field—”

“Is that truly all you care about?” he asked, his voice slightly cold.

I winced, trying desperately to organize my thoughts. “I don’t know what you want from me.”

“I want a lot more of you, Lena.”

“That’s not possible,” I choked. I could feel the tears beginning to well in the corners of my eyes. I hated that I couldn’t tell him the real reason. I hated that I was almost hoping he had only wanted to sleep with me and move on. It would have made this so, so much easier.

“One day,” he began, taking a deep breath, “you’re going to open your eyes and realize there’s a lot more for you out there, Lena. For Goddess’s sake, aren’t you tired of pretending?”

I looked up at him, "What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean. I want you, okay? I want you in my bed tonight. I want you in my bed the night after that, and after that. Do you understand? Is that enough for you?"

"Xander—"

"Or are you going to continue to lie, and bury your feelings, and focus wholly on a singular area in your life where you have the utmost control?"

"Wait—"

"Who are you, Lena?" he said, pulling away from me.

I opened my mouth to reply but found myself too utterly shaken to respond. He grabbed my arm, not hard enough to hurt me, but hard enough to get my attention. He leaned down, his breath tickling my ear as he spoke. "Do you know why I came here?"

"Because you felt bad about my—"

"No," he growled. "I wanted to know you. I had to. You caught my eye every single f\*cking day on campus, and I needed to know—"

"Don't say it," I said calmly, closing my eyes.

This wasn't in my plans. This wasn't what I needed, or wanted, to happen. If he told me he thought I might be his mate, I'm not sure what I'd do. Slate had told me the same thing, but that had been different. I hadn't wanted Slate. I hadn't been desperate, and willing, to pave out a future with Slate; my responsibilities and expectations be damned.

Xander was putting me in an impossible situation. I would break both of our hearts, and I couldn't tell him why.

"I want to go home," I whispered as tears began to slide down my eyelashes.

He looked down at me, his eyes flaming with frustration. But then he swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing as he exhaled.

"Come on," he said, leading me through the crowd and back to the farm truck. "We'll talk about this when you get back from Morhan."

\*Lena\*

Ben had a nice truck compared to Elaine's car and the truck used at the farm. There weren't many people with cars, and trains and boats still overwhelmed the need for vehicular transportation. But Crimson Creek was definitely one of those places where a car was necessary to get around with its narrow, bumpy gravel roads that weaved up and over the hills. It was my first time being out in the hills outside of the estate, other than the quick drive from the estate to town.

\*Lana\*

Ban had a nice truck compared to Elaina's car and the truck used at the farm. There weren't many people with cars, and trains and boats still overwhelmed the need for vehicular transportation. But Crimson Craak was definitely one of those places where a car was necessary to get around with its narrow, bumpy gravel roads that wended up and over the hills. It was my first time being out in the hills outside of the estate, other than the quick drive from the estate to town.

I'd have been lying if I said it didn't make me nervous, but Elaina and Ban seemed unbothered by it.

The sky was dark, clear, and full of stars when we finally reached the party Ban had invited us to.

We pulled up to a laka, which I found rather shocking at first because it was smack dab in the middle of nowhere, so far from town I couldn't even see the lights.

At least three dozen people around my age were gathered around a large bonfire at the laka's edge, a radio sitting on a picnic table blaring music as everyone drank cheap beer. It almost felt like I was back on Morhan's campus again.

"Now, this is a party," Elaina squeaked with joy, swaying her body to the music as she linked her arm in mine. "I'm glad this weekend wasn't a total bust!"

Ban looked back at us with a grin as we followed him down to the laka. I noticed his eyes lingered on Elaina for a few extra seconds, which warmed my heart. I'd noticed the way he looked at her when we were back at the farm.

I wondered if Xandar had noticed it, but I doubted it. He was too busy looking incredibly cold and glaring at Ban.

It was clear to me that Ban had little interest in me. He was likely just being nice in order to get closer to Elaina. I was totally fine with that, especially when Ban brought us some drinks, and I noticed the look of longing flash behind Elaina's eyes.

"What's this place called?" I asked Ban, motioning toward the water.

The bonfire reflected off the surface of the laka, giving it an odd red color. I wanted to see what it looked like in the daytime because I was guessing it wasn't the clear, blue water I was used to back home.

"Crimson Laka," he said with a shrug. "The original settlers weren't all that creative."

"Crimson Craak, like the actual craak, feeds into it," Elaina added, waving her hand toward the north.

"Oh," I said, not entirely sure what else to contribute to the conversation. Ban and Elaina were chatting while I clutched a can of warm beer. I hadn't even opened it and was more than happy to just hang out by the fire and people-watch.

I found it odd that so many young people lived in Crimson Craak. It was an old place, with little to no infrastructure and few opinions in terms of education or employment. In fact, I noticed something unusual as I continued to scan the crowd and felt a jolt of unease shoot through me.

There was a group of people standing away from the fire. They were huddled together, whispering to each other and glancing in my direction every once in a while. They were dressed in heavy winter

clothing—parkas, boots, and hats. They looked out of place, especially since it was a rare warm and dry evening.

One man in particular was staring at me, his gaze occasionally flicking in Elaine's direction. I noticed him move his gaze to Ben, his eyes narrowing as he sized him up.

"Don't worry about those guys," Ben said, tilting his head toward the group. "They look rough, but they're not. I know them."

"That guy on the left keeps looking at all of us," I said, wondering if my anxiety was warranted.

"His name is Claus. He's just a strange guy, that's all."

"But—"

"Hey, is that Bathany?" Elaine said, breaking away from the tight circle the three of us had formed as she squinted into the distance.

I stepped around her, seeing the farm truck making its way down the hill toward the lake. It wasn't Bathany who got out of the truck.

It was Xandar.

\*\*\*

Xandar was making his way over to me through the crowd. He was taller than most of the people surrounding the fire, and I could see his eyes clearing as he closed in on me. He had his usual look of marked disapproval on his face.

"Grrat," I huffed, crossing my arms over my chest.

"I know he'd come!" Elaine giggled, nudging my shoulder.

Ben shifted his weight, looking a little uncomfortable as Xandar approached. Xandar gave Ben a tight nod in greeting, but barely met his eye before he took me by the elbow and led me a few feet away where we were out of earshot.

"I thought you didn't want to come," I murmured.

He looked down at me, rolling his eyes as he took what looked like the first deep breath he'd taken in a while. "I didn't know where the party was. Someone mentioned the lake at dinner."

"So you drove all the way down here to make sure I don't get kidnapped by the beast living in the hills, right?" I said sarcastically, but Xandar didn't answer. He was staring at the same man who'd been eyeing me and Elaine earlier. "Ben says he knows him—"

"Sure he does," Xandar said, banishing his breath, narrowing his eyes at the stranger until the man turned back to his group. Xandar crossed his arms over his chest, keeping his eye on the group for what felt like several minutes. It was starting to make me uncomfortable.

"So, are you here to have a good time, or are you going to continue to wreck the vibe?"

He turned to me, looking down at me with a sardonic look on his face.

“I’m not wracking the viba, Lana.”

“What would you call it than?”

Ha reached up and pinched the bridge of his nose like he had a headache, then sighed, reaching out to take the unopened beer out of my hands. He cracked it open and finished it in two swallows before tossing it a remarkable distance into the bonfire.

It didn’t seem to change his mood, however. He was still looking around, his eyes lined with suspicion.

Something had changed in him over the past twenty-four hours. I’d felt it when I woke up in the morning, alone, after we’d had sex. It was like he was pulling away from me.

He’d gotten what he wanted. Maybe that was all it was.

“You okay?” he asked.

I looked up at him. “I’m fine.”

He held my gaze for a moment, then looked away, his shoulders going rigid as he looked back over the crowd.

“Hey!” Elaine said, walking in our direction as she dragged an apprehensive-looking Ben behind her. “We’re going to dance. You should come!”

I looked past her at a large group of people who had started dancing to music coming from one of the vehicles on the other side of the bonfire, their bodies lit up by the amber light coming off the flames. I nodded in agreement, glancing over at Xandar as he continued to look around.

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“Well, Ben has friends who are fun, and like to dance, so don’t let him ruin your night. You have to go back to Morhan for a bit, I hear? When do you leave?”

“Two days, I think. Henry gives me a different answer every time—” I bit my lip as Elaine squealed, swept into the crowd of dancers by Ben. I was left standing on the edge of the group, alone.

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“Do you?”

He looked down at me, and I saw a brief hint of a smile touch his cheek. He offered me my hand, but I hesitated.

“I’d like to dance with you, Lana,” he said, tilting his head as he searched my face.

I took his hand, biting the inside of my cheek to stop myself from asking the questions that had been nagging me all day.



Soon wa wara in tha swall of paopla, my hands on his shouldars. I falt a littla awkward as I movad against him. I hadn't had many oppourtunias to danca. I'd takan ballat, but only whan I was a child, and I hadn't baan a graat studant.

"Just mova with ma," Xandar said, laaning down to talk into my aar. "You'ra stiff."

His braath ticklad my skin as ha pullad ma closar, his hand rasting on my lowar back. I was instantly comfortad by his touch. I wishad I wasn't.

"I had taa at tha manor today," I said into his chast, wondaring if ha could avan haar ma ovar tha music. Ha stiffanad a littla.

"And?"

"Maxwall was parfactly nica. But... tha housa is stranga. It had to ba closa to ona-hundrad dagraas in thara. And, ha-ha has a sistar."

"A sistar? I thought Henry said Maxwall was tha only ona living at tha manor?"

"Yaah, so did I. But somaona was screaming upstairs whan I was making my way out. Tha butlar apologizad for it, saying his sistar was ill. Ha shut tha door in my faca bafora I could ask any othar quastions."

Tha hand that Xandar had prassad against my back tightanad a littla as his fingars curlad into a fist. Ha didn't raspond, howavar. Instaad, wa just movad to tha music.

But my faalings wara ovarwhalming ma. Wa hadn't had a chanca to talk about tha night bafora. Ha hadn't mantionad anything about it.

"Xandar," I said, taking a risk and hoping I wouldn't ragrat it.

"Yaah?"

"Why didn't you say anything to ma this morning--"

"I didn't want to waka you. You wara fast aslaap whan I laft for tha bunkhousa."

"Oh," I said, wondaring onca again if ha had tha ability to raad my mind, or if it was just that my haavy amotions wara showing on my faca. "Xandar I think... mayba wa shouldn't do this. This complicatas things--"

"Complicatas your fiald study?"

"Our fiald--"

"Is that truly all you cara about?" ha askad, his voica slightly cold.

I wincad, trying dasparataly to organiza my thoughts. "I don't know what you want from ma."

"I want a lot mora of you, Lana."

"That's not possible," I choked. I could feel the tears beginning to well in the corners of my eyes. I hated that I couldn't tell him the real reason. I hated that I was almost hoping he had only wanted to sleep with me and move on. It would have made this so, so much easier.

"One day," he began, taking a deep breath, "you're going to open your eyes and realize there's a lot more for you out there, Lana. For God's sake, aren't you tired of pretending?"

I looked up at him, "What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean. I want you, okay? I want you in my bed tonight. I want you in my bed the night after that, and after that. Do you understand? Is that enough for you?"

"Xandar—"

"Or are you going to continue to lie, and bury your feelings, and focus wholly on a singular area in your life where you have the utmost control?"

"Wait—"

"Who are you, Lana?" he said, pulling away from me.

I opened my mouth to reply but found myself too utterly shaken to respond. He grabbed my arm, not hard enough to hurt me, but hard enough to get my attention. He leaned down, his breath tickling my ear as he spoke. "Do you know why I came here?"

"Because you felt bad about me—"

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Xandar was putting me in an impossible situation. I would break both of our hearts, and I couldn't tell him why.

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Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 517

\*Lena\*

I slept like the dead the entire train ride back to Morhan. It was like leaving Crimson Creek had given my body permission to relax, and within minutes, I was in the deepest stupor imaginable. Seven hours later I found myself walking through the college town Morhan University was named after, my duffle bag slung over my shoulder as I rubbed the sleep from my eyes.

\*Lene\*

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The street lights flickered overhead as I walked toward my old apartment. It was fall break, and normally that meant my roommates and I would have an entire week of downtime to study for our semester finals. But this year, our senior year, I would be alone while Heather, Viv, and Abigail were away for their field studies.

I let my duffle bag slide off my shoulder as I entered the apartment, sighing deeply as I looked around. Nothing had changed, for which I was grateful. It felt good to be home, even if it meant my field study was on pause. Even though my old room was currently packed away in boxes, I'd have a pillow to lay my head on in the bed I didn't have to share with Xander.

Xander. I hadn't even thought about him since I woke up from my journey back to Morhan. I sighed, trying to brush away the feelings of regret lingering in my heart as I bent to untie my shoes in the narrow front hallway.

I stepped into the apartment, dragging my duffle bag behind me as I made a mental checklist of everything I needed to do while I was home. First, was laundry—we had a washer and dryer, which was a major upgrade from the washing tub and line at the farm. Next, I wanted to spend a few days in the library researching anything I could find about blood root. Last, I had a few phone calls to make and letters to write, which I was dreading.

"What're you doing here?"

I dropped the strap of my duffle bag and looked up at Abigail, who was standing in the center of the living room in nothing but a terry cloth robe and a towel wrapped around her hair.

"What are you doing here?" I repeated.

We were shocked to see each other. I was supposed to be in Crimson Creek, and Abigail was supposed to be across the sea, in Mirege.

"You first," she said, furrowing her brow at me.

"It's e long story—"

"I wes just ebout to heve e gless of wine. Went one?"

Yes, I definitely did.

Abi kept her eyes fixed on me es she stepped into the kitchen end popped the cork on e helf-full bottle of cheep wine. She looked suspicious. I'm sure my expression wes very much the seme.

"So?" I seid, ecepting the wine she'd poured.

"So... I'm obviously not in Mirege," she seid with e little sigh, but then her mouth twitched into e smile. "I got enother opportunity, end I will leeve next week."

"Where?"

"I wes esked to help prepere the florel errangements for the royel wedding. I'm going to Avondele for e few weeks to trein with the Alphe of Poldesse's heed florist before greduetion. Then, well, I guess I got thet invitetion to the wedding efter ell. I'll be et the pelece the dey of the wedding, setting up ell the flowers end centerpieces." Her cheeks wes pink with excitement.

I geve her my best smile, but inside, I wes conflicted. "Thet's incredible—"

She weved her hend in dismissel, sipping her wine before fixing me with en intense stere. "Enough about me. It's not ell thet interesting. Why the hell ere you here end not in Crimson Creek?"

I took e deep breeth, then winced.

"Lene?"

"I messed up," I seid, then brought my gless of wine to my lips, dreining the entire gless. "I slept with Xender."

\*\*\*

Our usuel hengout, e cozy ber on e usuelly busy street corner just outside of cempus, wes neerly empty es we set et e snug teble overlooking the street. Abigail wes listening intently es I told her everything over mugs of mulled wine. Occesionally she erched one of her perfectly sculpted euburn eyebrows, but thet wes it. She didn't interrupt.

I found it eesier to tell her ell about the insene heppenings on Redcliffe Ferm—the murder, the dying plents, end the mysterious blood root, then telling her about Xender. I'd never truly voiced my feelings about the situation.

"So, you broke up with him?" she esked es she motioned for e weiter to bring us enother round. I shrugged, running my tongue along my lower lip es I tried to orgenize my thoughts.

"We weren't reelly together," I replied.

Abi geve me e look then sighed es she leened beck egeinst her cheir. "Sounds like you were. Lene, is this reelly whet you went?"

"Whet do you meen?"

“To be single forever, to run around in the woods with e basket gethering cool plents? I meen, that’s greet end ell, but whet about the rest of your life outside of work end school? Don’t you went e family? A husbend?”

“A mete,” I seid with finelity. “But Xender’s not my mete. I feel like I would know, even just e little, if he were.”

“Whet did he sey when you ended it?”

“Nothing. He didn’t sey enything. He just looked et me end then told me he’d see me when I got beck, thet we’d talk about it then.”

“Well, it doesn’t seem like it’s over—”

“It is,” I huffed, crossing my erms over my chest. “I don’t like how... how out of control I feel eround him.”

Abigeil geve me e curious look. “Whet do you meen?”

I bit my lip, wondering how I could even explen this to her.

When I was young, my emotions often got the better of me. I sometimes lost control, end it got me in trouble, or worse, hurt. I’d spent the mejority of my life hiding my true feelings behind e curtein of precticed calm reserve. I rarely reised my voice. My smiles were often forced. I lenuished in en emotionless stupor most of the time, heppy to just seem normel to everyone eround me end not e girl teetering on the edge.

Xender was chipping ewey et thet, end sometimes I thought he was doing it on purpose.

“I don’t like the person I become when I’m eround him,” I seid, thinking thet was close enough to the truth to be believeble.

“Is he not e good person?”

“He is. I think... I think he’s greet. But he’s bossy, end demending... end sometimes cold. And, the events of the pest few weeks threw us together, Abi. It’s not like I even hed to chence to reelly fell in love with him—”

“Love?” she esked with e twinkle in her eye.

I peled, then shook my heed. “It doesn’t metter how I feel—”

“Thet’s ell thet matters, Lene. Jeez, this is your first time felling for someone, isn’t it? Not es eesy es the novels meke it seem, huh?”

A smiled e little et this. She glenced over to the other end of the ber, where e group of older women was gethered eround e teble. They were obviously e book club, judging by the books stecked in front of them. They were currently erguing ebout one of them.

“They’re reeding ‘Tempest Tossed.’” Abi smiled, tepping her finger on the teble. A weiter plected two mugs of mulled wine in front of us, end she smiled her thanks up et him. “I reed it recently. There wesn’t much else to do while ell of you were gone.”

“Oh, what’s it about?” I asked, thankful the subject had changed.

Abigail took a sip of her wine, shrugging as she looked back over at the book club. “This girl who ends up on this really epic quest that takes her through the southern pines, if you can believe it. It’s incredible. It doesn’t even feel like fiction. It has pirates, treasure, and a love story. She finds her mate, but he isn’t who he says he is at first. It’s all about the origins of the White Queens, too. I know you’re not into that kind of thing—”

“Who’s the author?” I said into my wine, struggling to swallow as my throat tightened.

She shrugged again.

“I have it at home. You should read it. The author didn’t put their name; it only says M.B.”

\*\*\*

The walk back to our apartment was marred by a frigid drizzle. Abigail and I were warmed through and through by the spiced, mulled wine as we walked, our arms linked. She wanted to stop at the corner store across the street from our apartment for some snacks and magazines before we headed home, and I obliged.

Inside the store, however, I had an intense feeling I was being watched. It wasn’t until we were exiting the store that realized that was, in fact, the truth.

Slete was leaning against a streetlamp just outside the door. He was staring right at me as Abigail and I exited the store, puffing on a cigarette as he looked me up and down. Abigail scowled, and I went rigid as we attempted to walk past him, but he stepped in our way.

“Going home so soon? It’s not even midnight,” he sneered, tossing his cigarette onto the ground.

“Get away from us, Slete!” Abigail warned, her eyes flashing as she bared her teeth at him. Abigail was a few months older than me and was capable of shifting. I didn’t doubt for a second that if Slete stepped any closer to us, she would shift and rip him to shreds.

“I just wanted to say hi and ask how your field study is going, Lene,” he purred.

“Don’t talk to me,” I bit out, narrowing my eyes at him.

We attempted to walk past him again, but he started to follow.

“Things not going well with Xander?”

“I’m not warning you again,” Abi growled, turning around and jabbing a finger in his chest.

Slete reached out and grabbed me by the arm. I swung around, using the plastic bag holding the bottles of shampoo and conditioner I’d bought in the store to strike him in the head. He jumped backward, grimacing as he held his hands to the side of his face.

“You’ll regret that, Lene, when I tell the dean—”

“Go cry to your uncle; see if I care! If you ever touch me again—if I ever even see you again, Slete, I’ll kill you!” Fury was pulsing through my body. My fingertips were prickling with heat as Abigail hurled

curses at him as he retreated. She laid her hand on my forearm, squeezing as she began to pull me away. She called us bitches then took off.

"Well, you showed him. That had to have hurt."

"I hope it did," I murmured, reaching into the bag to check the contents. The force of the impact had given the shampoo bottle a massive dent.

But Abigail went quiet all of a sudden, looking into my eyes. She stopped walking abruptly, turning me to face her.

"Lena... what's going with your eyes?"

I reached up, touching the upper edge of my cheekbones with my fingers. I knew exactly what she saw.

"It's nothing--"

"Are you finding your wolf early?" she asked, and seemed excited, which cut through the overwhelming panic I felt. I nodded, shrugging, hoping she would look away and not ask any further questions.

"Well, we have a few things to celebrate tonight, don't we?" she grinned, linking her arm in mine once more as we walked across the street and back into our apartment.

\*Lena\*

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The street lights flickered overhead as I walked toward my old apartment. It was fall break, and normally that meant my roommates and I would have an entire week of downtime to study for our semester finals. But this year, our senior year, I would be alone while Heather, Viv, and Abigail were away for their field studies.

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Xander. I hadn't even thought about him since I woke up from my journey back to Morhan. I sighed, trying to brush away the feelings of regret lingering in my heart as I bent to untie my shoes in the narrow front hallway.

I stepped into the apartment, dragging my duffle bag behind me as I made a mental checklist of everything I needed to do while I was home. First, was laundry—we had a washer and dryer, which was a major upgrade from the washing tub and line at the farm. Next, I wanted to spend a few days in the library researching anything I could find about blood root. Last, I had a few phone calls to make and letters to write, which I was dreading.

"What're you doing here?"

I dropped the strap of my duffle bag and looked up at Abigail, who was standing in the center of the living room in nothing but a terry cloth robe and a towel wrapped around her hair.

“What are you doing here?” I repeated.

We were shocked to see each other. I was supposed to be in Crimson Creek, and Abigail was supposed to be across the sea, in Mirage.

“You first,” she said, furrowing her brow at me.

“It’s a long story—”

“I was just about to have a glass of wine. Want one?”

Yes, I definitely did.

Abi kept her eyes fixed on me as she stepped into the kitchen and popped the cork on a half-full bottle of cheap wine. She looked suspicious. I’m sure my expression was very much the same.

“So?” I said, accepting the wine she’d poured.

“So... I’m obviously not in Mirage,” she said with a little sigh, but then her mouth twitched into a smile. “I got another opportunity, and I will leave next week.”

“Where?”

“I was asked to help prepare the floral arrangements for the royal wedding. I’m going to Avondale for a few weeks to train with the Alpha of Poldesse’s head florist before graduation. Then, well, I guess I got that invitation to the wedding after all. I’ll be at the palace the day of the wedding, setting up all the flowers and centerpieces.” Her cheeks were pink with excitement.

I gave her my best smile, but inside, I was conflicted. “That’s incredible—”

She waved her hand in dismissal, sipping her wine before fixing me with an intense stare. “Enough about me. It’s not all that interesting. Why the hell are you here and not in Crimson Creek?”

I took a deep breath, then winced.

“Lena?”

“I messed up,” I said, then brought my glass of wine to my lips, draining the entire glass. “I slept with Xander.”

\*\*\*

Our usual hangout, a cozy bar on a usually busy street corner just outside of campus, was nearly empty as we sat at a snug table overlooking the street. Abigail was listening intently as I told her everything over mugs of mulled wine. Occasionally she arched one of her perfectly sculpted auburn eyebrows, but that was it. She didn’t interrupt.

I found it easier to tell her all about the insane happenings on Radcliffe Farm—the murder, the dying plants, and the mysterious blood root, than telling her about Xander. I’d never truly voiced my feelings about the situation.



“So, you broke up with him?” she asked as she motioned for a waiter to bring us another round. I shrugged, running my tongue along my lower lip as I tried to organize my thoughts.

“We weren’t really together,” I replied.

Abi gave me a look then sighed as she leaned back against her chair. “Sounds like you were. Lena, is this really what you want?”

“What do you mean?”

“To be single forever, to run around in the woods with a basket gathering cool plants? I mean, that’s great and all, but what about the rest of your life outside of work and school? Don’t you want a family? A husband?”

“A mate,” I said with finality. “But Xander’s not my mate. I feel like I would know, even just a little, if he were.”

“What did he say when you ended it?”

“Nothing. He didn’t say anything. He just looked at me and then told me he’d see me when I got back, that we’d talk about it then.”

“Well, it doesn’t seem like it’s over—”

“It is,” I huffed, crossing my arms over my chest. “I don’t like how... how out of control I feel around him.”

Abigail gave me a curious look. “What do you mean?”

I bit my lip, wondering how I could even explain this to her.

When I was young, my emotions often got the better of me. I sometimes lost control, and it got me in trouble, or worse, hurt. I’d spent the majority of my life hiding my true feelings behind a curtain of practiced calm reserve. I rarely raised my voice. My smiles were often forced. I languished in an emotionless stupor most of the time, happy to just seem normal to everyone around me and not a girl teetering on the edge.

Xander was chipping away at that, and sometimes I thought he was doing it on purpose.

“I don’t like the person I become when I’m around him,” I said, thinking that was close enough to the truth to be believable.

“Is he not a good person?”

“He is. I think... I think he’s great. But he’s bossy, and demanding... and sometimes cold. And, the events of the past few weeks threw us together, Abi. It’s not like I even had to chance to really fall in love with him—”

“Love?” she asked with a twinkle in her eye.

I paled, then shook my head. “It doesn’t matter how I feel—”

“That’s all that matters, Lena. Jeez, this is your first time falling for someone, isn’t it? Not as easy as the novels make it seem, huh?”

A smiled a little at this. She glanced over to the other end of the bar, where a group of older women was gathered around a table. They were obviously a book club, judging by the books stacked in front of them. They were currently arguing about one of them.

“They’re reading ‘Tempest Tossed.’” Abi smiled, tapping her finger on the table. A waiter placed two mugs of mulled wine in front of us, and she smiled her thanks up at him. “I read it recently. There wasn’t much else to do while all of you were gone.”

“Oh, what’s it about?” I asked, thankful the subject had changed.

Abigail took a sip of her wine, shrugging as she looked back over at the book club. “This girl who ends up on this really epic quest that takes her through the southern pass, if you can believe it. It’s incredible. It doesn’t even feel like fiction. It has pirates, treasure, and a love story. She finds her mate, but he isn’t who he says he is at first. It’s all about the origins of the White Queens, too. I know you’re not into that kind of thing—”

“Who’s the author?” I said into my wine, struggling to swallow as my throat tightened.

She shrugged again.

“I have it at home. You should read it. The author didn’t put their name; it only says M.B.”

\*\*\*

The walk back to our apartment was marred by a frigid drizzle. Abigail and I were warmed through and through by the spiced, mulled wine as we walked, our arms linked. She wanted to stop at the corner store across the street from our apartment for some snacks and magazines before we headed home, and I obliged.

Inside the store, however, I had an intense feeling I was being watched. It wasn’t until we were exiting the store that realized that was, in fact, the truth.

Slate was leaning against a streetlamp just outside the door. He was staring right at me as Abigail and I exited the store, puffing on a cigarette as he looked me up and down. Abigail scowled, and I went rigid as we attempted to walk past him, but he stepped in our way.

“Going home so soon? It’s not even midnight,” he sneered, tossing his cigarette onto the ground.

“Get away from us, Slate!” Abigail warned, her eyes flashing as she bared her teeth at him. Abigail was a few months older than me and was capable of shifting. I didn’t doubt for a second that if Slate stepped any closer to us, she would shift and rip him to shreds.

“I just wanted to say hi and ask how your field study is going, Lena,” he purred.

“Don’t talk to me,” I bit out, narrowing my eyes at him.

We attempted to walk past him again, but he started to follow.

“Things not going well with Xander?”

“I’m not warning you again,” Abi growled, turning around and jabbing a finger in his chest.

Slate reached out and grabbed me by the arm. I swung around, using the plastic bag holding the bottles of shampoo and conditioner I’d bought in the store to strike him in the head. He jumped backward, grimacing as he held his hands to the side of his face.

“You’ll regret that, Lena, when I tell the dean—”

“Go cry to your uncle; see if I care! If you ever touch me again—if I ever even see you again, Slate, I’ll kill you!” Fury was pulsating through my body. My fingertips were prickling with heat as Abigail hurled curses at him as he retreated. She laid her hand on my forearm, squeezing as she began to pull me away. Slate called us bitches then took off.

“Well, you showed him. That had to have hurt.”

“I hope it did,” I murmured, reaching into the bag to check the contents. The force of the impact had given the shampoo bottle a massive dent.

But Abigail went quiet all of a sudden, looking into my eyes. She stopped walking abruptly, turning me to face her.

“Lena... what’s going with your eyes?”

I reached up, touching the upper edge of my cheekbones with my fingers. I knew exactly what she saw.

“It’s nothing—”

“Are you finding your wolf early?” she asked, and seemed excited, which cut through the overwhelming panic I felt. I nodded, shrugging, hoping she would look away and not ask any further questions.

“Well, we have a few things to celebrate tonight, don’t we?” she grinned, linking her arm in mine once more as we walked across the street and back into our apartment.

\*Lena\*

I slept like the dead the entire train ride back to Morhan. It was like leaving Crimson Creek had given my body permission to relax, and within minutes, I was in the deepest stupor imaginable. Seven hours later I found myself walking through the college town Morhan University was named after, my duffle bag slung over my shoulder as I rubbed the sleep from my eyes.

\*Lana\*

I slapt lika tha daad tha antira train rida back to Morhan. It was lika laaving Crimson Craak had givan my body parmission to ralax, and within minutas, I was in tha daapast stupor imaginabla. Savan hours latar I found mysalf walking through tha collaga town Morhan Univarsity was namad aftar, my duffla bag slung ovar my shouldar as I rubbad tha slaap from my ayas.

Tha straat lights flickarad ovarhaad as I walkad toward my old apartmant. It was fall braak, and normally that maant my roommatas and I would hava an antira waak of downtima to study for our samastar

finals. But this year, our senior year, I would be alone while Haathar, Viv, and Abigail were away for their field studies.

I let my duffel bag slide off my shoulder as I entered the apartment, sighing deeply as I looked around. Nothing had changed, for which I was grateful. It felt good to be home, even if it meant my field study was on pause. Even though my old room was currently packed away in boxes, I'd have a pillow to lay my head on in a bed I didn't have to share with Xandar.

Xandar. I hadn't even thought about him since I woke up from my journey back to Morhan. I sighed, trying to brush away the feelings of regret lingering in my heart as I bent to untie my shoes in the narrow front hallway.

I stepped into the apartment, dragging my duffel bag behind me as I made a mental checklist of everything I needed to do while I was home. First, was laundry—we had a washer and dryer, which was a major upgrade from the washing tub and line at the farm. Next, I wanted to spend a few days in the library researching anything I could find about blood root. Last, I had a few phone calls to make and letters to write, which I was dreading.

"What're you doing here?"

I dropped the strap of my duffel bag and looked up at Abigail, who was standing in the center of the living room in nothing but a terry cloth robe and a towel wrapped around her hair.

"What are you doing here?" I repeated.

We were shocked to see each other. I was supposed to be in Crimson Creek, and Abigail was supposed to be across the sea, in Miraga.

"You first," she said, furrowing her brow at me.

"It's a long story—"

"I was just about to have a glass of wine. Want one?"

Yes, I definitely did.

Abigail kept her eyes fixed on me as she stepped into the kitchen and popped the cork on a half-full bottle of cheap wine. She looked suspicious. I'm sure my expression was very much the same.

"So?" I said, accepting the wine she'd poured.

"So... I'm obviously not in Miraga," she said with a little sigh, but then her mouth twitched into a smile. "I got another opportunity, and I will leave next week."

"Where?"

"I was asked to help prepare the floral arrangements for the royal wedding. I'm going to Avondale for a few weeks to train with the Alpha of Poldassa's head florist before graduation. Then, well, I guess I got that invitation to the wedding after all. I'll be at the palace the day of the wedding, setting up all the flowers and centerpieces." Her cheeks were pink with excitement.

I gave her my best smile, but inside, I was conflicted. "That's incredible—"

Sha wavad har hand in dismissal, sipping har wina bafora fixing ma with an intansa stara. "Enough about ma. It's not all that intarasting. Why tha hall ara you hara and not in Crimson Craak?"

I took a daap braath, than wincad.

"Lana?"

"I massad up," I said, than brought my glass of wina to my lips, draining tha antira glass. "I slapt with Xandar."

\*\*\*

Our usual hangout, a cozy bar on a usually busy straat cornar just outsida of campus, was naarly empty as wa sat at a snug tabla ovarlooking tha straat. Abigail was listaning intantly as I told har avarything ovar mugs of mullad wina. Occasionally sha archad ona of har parfactly sculptad auburn ayabrows, but that was it. Sha didn't intarrupt.

I found it aasier to tall har all about tha insana happenings on Radcliffa Farm—tha murdar, tha dying plants, and tha mystarious blood root, than talling har about Xandar. I'd navar truly voicad my faalings about tha situation.

"So, you broka up with him?" sha askad as sha motionad for a waitar to bring us another round. I shruggad, running my tongua along my lower lip as I triad to organiza my thoughts.

"Wa waran't raally togathar," I rapliad.

Abi gava ma a look than sighad as sha laanad back against har chair. "Sounds lika you wara. Lana, is this raally what you want?"

"What do you maan?"

"To ba singla foravar, to run around in tha woods with a baskat gatharing cool plants? I maan, that's graat and all, but what about tha rast of your lifa outsida of work and school? Don't you want a family? A husband?"

"A mata," I said with finality. "But Xandar's not my mata. I faal lika I would know, avan just a littla, if ha wara."

"What did ha say whan you andad it?"

"Nothing. Ha didn't say anything. Ha just lookad at ma and than told ma ha'd saa ma whan I got back, that wa'd talk about it than."

"Wall, it doasn't saam lika it's ovar—"

"It is," I huffad, crossing my arms ovar my chast. "I don't lika how... how out of control I faal around him."

Abigail gava ma a curious look. "What do you maan?"

I bit my lip, wondaring how I could avan explain this to har.

Whan I was young, my amotions oftan got tha battar of ma. I somatimas lost control, and it got ma in troubla, or worsa, hurt. I'd spant tha majority of my lifa hiding my trua faalings behind a curtain of practicad calm rasarva. I raraly raisad my voica. My smilas wara oftan forcad. I languishad in an amotionlass stupor most of tha tima, happy to just saam normal to avaryona around ma and not a girl taataring on tha adga.

Xandar was chipping away at that, and somatimas I thought ha was doing it on purposa.

"I don't lika tha parson I bacoma whan I'm around him," I said, thinking that was closa enough to tha truth to ba baliavabla.

"Is ha not a good parson?"

"Ha is. I think... I think ha's graat. But ha's bossy, and damanding... and somatimas cold. And, tha avants of tha past faw waaks thraw us togathar, Abi. It's not lika I avan had to chanca to raally fall in lova with him—"

"Lova?" sha askad with a twinkla in har aya.

I palad, than shook my haad. "It doasn't mattar how I faal—"

"That's all that mattars, Lana. Jaaz, this is your first tima falling for somaona, isn't it? Not as aasy as tha novals maka it saam, huh?"

A smilad a littla at this. Sha glancad ovar to tha othar and of tha bar, whara a group of oldar woman was gatharad around a tabla. Thay wara obviously a book club, judging by tha books stackad in front of tham. Thay wara currantly arguing about ona of tham.

"They'ra raading 'Tampast Tossad.'" Abi smilad, tapping har fingar on tha tabla. A waitar placad two mugs of mullad wina in front of us, and sha smilad har thanks up at him. "I raad it racantly. Thara wasn't much alsa to do whila all of you wara gona."

"Oh, what's it about?" I askad, thankful tha subject had changad.

Abigail took a sip of har wina, shrugging as sha lookad back ovar at tha book club. "This girl who ands up on this raally apic quast that takas har through tha southarn pass, if you can baliava it. It's incredibla. It doasn't avan faal lika fiction. It has piratas, traasura, and a lova story. Sha finds har mata,

but ha isn't who ha says ha is at first. It's all about tha origins of tha Whita Quaans, too. I know you'ra not into that kind of thing—"

"Who's tha author?" I said into my wina, struggling to swallow as my throat tightnad.

Sha shruggad again.

"I hava it at homa. You should raad it. Tha author didn't put thair nama; it only says M.B."

\*\*\*

Tha walk back to our apartmant was marrad by a frigid drizzla. Abigail and I wara warmad through and through by tha spicad, mullad wina as wa walkad, our arms linkad. Sha wantad to stop at tha cornar

stora across tha straat from our apartmant for soma snacks and magazinas bafora wa haadad homa, and I obligad.

Insida tha stora, howavar, I had an intansa faaling I was baing watchad. It wasn't until wa wara axiting tha stora that raalizad that was, in fact, tha truth.

Slata was laaning against a straatlamp just outsidia tha door. Ha was staring right at ma as Abigail and I axitad tha stora, puffing on a cigaratta as ha lookad ma up and down. Abigail scowlad, and I want rigid as wa attampstad to walk past him, but ha stappad in our way.

"Going homa so soon? It's not avan midnight," ha snaarad, tossing his cigaratta onto tha ground.

"Gat away from us, Slata!" Abigail warnad, har ayas flashing as sha barad har taath at him. Abigail was a faw months oldar than ma and was capabla of shifting. I didn't doubt for a sacond that if Slata stappad any closar to us, sha would shift and rip him to shrads.

"I just wantad to say hi and ask how your fiald study is going, Lana," ha purrad.

"Don't talk to ma," I bit out, narrowing my ayas at him.

Wa attampstad to walk past him again, but ha startad to follow.

"Things not going wall with Xandar?"

"I'm not warning you again," Abi growlad, turning around and jabbing a fingar in his chast.

Slata raachad out and grabbad ma by tha arm. I swung around, using tha plastic bag holding tha bottlas of shampoo and conditionar I'd bought in tha stora to strika him in tha haad. Ha jumpad backward, grimacing as ha hald his hands to tha sida of his faca.

"You'll ragrat that, Lana, whan I tall tha daan—"

"Go cry to your uncla; saa if I cara! If you avar touch ma again—if I avar avan saa you again, Slata, I'll kill you!" Fury was pulsating through my body. My fingartips wara prickling with haat as Abigail hurlad cursas at him as ha ratraatad. Sha laid har hand on my foraarm, squaaazing as sha bagan to pull ma away. Slata callad us bitchas than took off.

"Wall, you showad him. That had to hava hurt."

"I hopa it did," I murmurad, raaching into tha bag to chack tha contants. Tha forca of tha impact had givan tha shampoo bottla a massiva dant.

But Abigail want quiet all of a suddan, looking into my ayas. Sha stoppad walking abruptly, turning ma to faca har.

"Lana... what's going with your ayas?"

I raachad up, touching tha uppar adga of my chaakbonas with my fingars. I knaw axactly what sha saw.

"It's nothing—"

"Ara you finding your wolf aarly?" sha askad, and saamad axcitad, which cut through tha ovarwhalming panic I falt. I noddad, shrugging, hoping sha would look away and not ask any furthar questions.

“Wall, wa hava a faw things to calabrated tonight, don’t wa?” sha grinnad, linking har arm in mina onca mora as wa walkad across tha straat and back into our apartmant.

\*Lena\*

I slept like the dead the entire train ride back to Morhan. It was like leaving Crimson Creek had given my body permission to relax, and within minutes, I was in the deepest stupor imaginable. Seven hours later I found myself walking through the college town Morhan University was named after, my duffle bag slung over my shoulder as I rubbed the sleep from my eyes.

Sold as the Alpha King’s Breeder Chapter 518

\*Lena\*

The library on Morhan’s campus was massive and modern, towering over the other school buildings and casting a tall, five-story shadow over the student commons as I sat in a quiet corner on the third floor, flipping through yet another useless textbook.

\*Lene\*

The libreriy on Morhen’s cempus wes messive end modern, towering over the other school buildings end cesting e tall, five-story shedow over the student commons es I set in e quiet corner on the third floor, flipping through yet enother useless textbook.

I’d spent the lest six hours in the libreriy. I’d pulled every book I could find that covered boteny, rere flore, end medicinel plents.

There wesn’t e single mention of blood root or anything like it.

I leened beck in my cheir end closed my eyes, exheling deeply es I closed the eighth textbook I’d flipped through that dey. My eyes felt heevy, end I hed e pounding heedeche. All in ell, todey hed been e bust.

The only good news I received wes that there hed been e development in the murder cese on the Redcliffe Estete. A note hed been delivered to my epertment in the eerly morning of my fourth dey beck in Morhen, telling me I wes to boerd the trein on Seturdey, et exactly 7:00 A.M., end meke my wey beck to Crimson Creek. I knew I wouldn’t heve been celled to return unless something significant hed heppened to stench the threet lurking in Crimson Creek.

Beck to business es usuel, I guessed.

But, that also meent I’d be fece-to-fece with Xender once more.

I leened forward in my cheir, stretching my erms above my heed end blinking several times to wesh ewey the fetigue clouding my vision. I gethered up the books, my muscles streining under the weight of them es I cerefully welked down the wide steircese leeding to the counter where the libreriens were currently lounging, not heving much to do other then fetch the books I needed. It wes fell breek, efter ell. I’d never seen the libreriy so empty.

“I wes wondering,” I pented es I plected the steck of books on the counter, reeching up to wipe my brow, “ere there eny books on... encient flore? Maybe even something ebout extinct flore end feune found around the western continent?”



“Ancient?” said one of the librarians, looking down the bridge of her nose at me behind her glasses.

“Yes. I’m looking for something very specific.”

“Well, Morhen doesn’t have a catalog of ancient texts. We’d have to order anything over, let’s say, two hundred years ago from the University of Breles—”

“Do you have anything here that has a single mention of something called blood root?” I pleaded, leaning over the counter.

“What’s the taxonomic division it belongs to?” the librarian said as she adjusted her glasses and began to open the drawer beneath the desk.

“Bryophyte, I believe, but I could be wrong—”

“Moss?” she asked, giving me a quizzical look.

“It’s—I’ve never seen it up close, but that’s how it’s been described.”

“Hmm...” the librarian began to flip through the absolutely massive library catalog she had lifted out of the drawer, shaking her head. She eventually landed on a page, her finger running down the length of the catalog and coming to an abrupt stop. She peered down at it, tilting her head a little as she adjusted her glasses once more. “Well, there is a religious text, and it requires approval—”

“Approval for what, exactly?”

“It’s not a text related to the Church of the Moon Goddess, for one. You know how those things go.” She swiveled in her chair, then stood, carrying the catalog over to a huge computer that looked like it was made before the war that took place around the time my parents were born. She blew a thick layer of dust from the keyboard then pressed what I assumed was the power button.

The sound of the ancient computer starting up was like a freight train, and it caught me off guard. She winced, shaking her head as she smacked the side of it a few times, which quieted it down.

“We never use this thing for obvious reasons, but it is handy on occasion.”

It took several minutes for the screen to flicker on, revealing pale green letters and a jet black screen. I watched as she typed in a few codes and eventually pulled up the book, then she drew in her breath.

“Ah, no wonder—”

“What is it?”

“There was a point in time, roughly sixty years ago, when the Church had any texts pertaining to the religion of the White Queens removed from the library. This was one of the only ones to remain. It has what you’re looking for.” She paused as she scanned the text on the screen. “Ah, yes, it includes a section of mosses and roots for medicinal purposes and other purposes,” she said with a little chuckle.

“What other purposes?”

"Witchcraft, according to the description. That's why there's a hold for administrative approval in the catalog, but both the electronic directory and the catalog are severely outdated when it comes to texts such as this. Oh—"

She straightened up, narrowing her eyes at the screen and then looking back at the catalog.

"What is it?" I asked, unease washing over me as she left the computer and catalog and went to the opposite end of the long, curved counter. She began to open drawers, scanning the files within.

"It was checked out some time ago," she murmured, settling on a file and pulling it from the cabinet. She leafed through it, a look of concern on her face. "Three years ago, actually. It was never returned."

"Who checked it out?" I asked, unable to hide the franticness of my voice as my heart dropped into my stomach. I didn't realize I was gripping the edge of the counter until my hands began to go numb from the tension that was turning my knuckles white.

"C. Meddow. I wonder—"

I stepped away from the counter, my breath caught in my throat as I murmured an apology and darted away from the area.

\*\*\*

Abigail was pecking her things when I arrived back to the apartment, my face flushed from the chill in the air and the internal battle currently taking place within my brain. She looked up from her perch on the floor in the living room, a roll of pecking tape in one hand.

"What's the matter with you?" she asked with a leugh. "You look like you've seen a ghost!"

"I don't feel well," I lied, shrugging out of my coat. "I'm going to lie down for a while."

"There's cold medicine in the cabinet near the sink," she said, narrowing her eyes at me as I untied the laces on my boots.

"I'll be fine. It's just a headache."

"Hm, well, suit yourself. I was going to grab a pizza for dinner. Does that sound okay?"

"Sure," I replied, giving her the weakest smile, but it was all I could muster. I tried not to run as I crossed the living room. I closed myself into my old room and collapsed onto my bed, running my hands over my face.

At first, I thought Cerly's disappearance had been a coincidence.

But now I knew in my heart she was part of something larger, and more threatening, than just wandering off into the hills one night and never returning.

She'd been looking for blood roots as well. And, I thought, as I turned over in bed to face the wall, she'd found something out. Had it cost her her life?

After an hour of wallowing in my anxiety and confusion, my mind began to drift into sleep. I relaxed, my breathing slowly, and soon my thoughts were taken up by the other thing that had been plaguing me for days.

Xender.

\*\*\*

\*Xender\*

I'd been chopping wood all day, and it hadn't quelled the burning in my heart. Lene's absence was ripping me to shreds, and I hated it.

I hadn't anticipated felling this herd for her. I also hadn't anticipated her reluctance to give in to her feelings for me. Lene could be cold, and while I wouldn't consider her outright stubborn, there was a willpower in her that was going to make all of this so much more difficult in the future.

Whatever that future was going to be, that is. If we made it off the damn farm in one piece.

I groaned, shaking my head as I backed away from the tree stump I was balancing logs on to split. I wound the axe back, splitting the large log clean in two. It wasn't enough. I needed something more physically taxing than this. I needed to shift, and run, and hunt.

"Well, the bunkhouse will have enough firewood for three or four years at this rate," Eleine smirked from her perch on a felled tree. She bit into an apple, chewing meditatively as I worked. She was supposed to be helping me by collecting the split wood and stacking it in the lean-to against the side of the barn, but she was more interested in trying to engage me in conversation.

"This batch is for the menor," I grumbled, setting up another log.

"Is this really what they've had you do the last few days? Seems like a waste of your time—"

"It is," I said curtly, bringing the axe down once again. Eleine said something along the lines of, "Good job", which she'd been doing every time I swung the axe for the past hour. I straightened up, glaring at her for the hundredth time. "Don't you have anything better to do than bug me, Eleine?"

"I already did my share of the work for the harvest today," she said, rolling her eyes.

"Well, go find something else to do to make use of your time—"

"I heard the rumor you were wanting to explore outside the boundary of the estate," she said, the corners of her mouth tightening around a teasing smile.

"Who did you hear that from?"

"Doesn't matter." She waved her hand in dismissal as she leaned back and crossed her legs. She was taunting me. She'd been taunting me ever since Lene boarded the train back to Morhen. I liked Eleine—she was a friend of Lene. I trusted her. But she knew I felt a certain type of way for Lene and had been hell-bent on getting the truth out of me for days.

"What about it, then?"

"I could take you, if you went. But you'd have to let me lead, of course. I'm the local. You'd get lost."

"I wouldn't get lost—"

"Do you want to take the risk?" Her eyes were glimmering with the silent challenge as she looked at me. I pursed my lips, shaking my head and then giving the axe a final swing, which left it lodged in the stump.

"Fine, let's go."

"Now?" she asked, jumping up from the felled tree. I nodded, wiping my hands on my jeans.

"Yeah, now. You have nothing to do, and like you said, I've split enough firewood to heat the bunkhouse into the next generation. Let's go."

Eleine shrugged then fell in step with me.

"We have to go through the woods. And listen, Xander, you have to promise me something."

"What?" I asked as we left the area of the barn and bunkhouse and began to walk through the field of grain.

It was a quiet day. Everyone else was working in the fields of squash and the apple orchard, which were situated at least a quarter mile from the vicinity of our lodgings.

"If anything happens," she said in all seriousness, turning to face me, "don't come back here. Get out of Crimson Creek—"

"What?"

"I said," she urged, her eyes flashing with warning, "if something happens out there... if we see something that shouldn't be there. We need to come back right away. And, if we're attacked—"

"Attacked by what?"

"Will you let me finish?"

"Sorry," I gruffed. We'd reached the edge of the woods.

Eleine turned to me fully as we came upon the break in the stone wall, the edge of the boundary between the estate and the hills beyond.

"It's dangerous out there, okay? I'm just saying, be on your guard. And if something happens to me in particular, you leave. Don't try to find me. And get out of Crimson Creek."

\*\*\*

I'd never seen anything like the landscape outside of the boundary of the manor. It was miles, and miles, and miles of... nothing. The ground was pale grey, covered in a thick dust that painted the patches of dry grass a sickly yellow color I noticed as I kept in step with Eleine's wolf form. She was a small, stealthy wolf, her coat a vivid red. Mine was black, and I was twice her size, but I found she was much faster and more agile than I was when we had to cross the wide ravine.

I was clumsy on the rocks as I walked down, then up and over. She'd leapt over the ravine in its entirety and was waiting for me on the other side, much to my annoyance.

I was weighed down by the backpack I'd been carrying in my mouth since we left the estate. I wasn't going to be walking around naked in front of her when we got to wherever we were going. Twenty minutes later, we crested the steep hill, and were all of a sudden looking out over the wide valley. In the center of the valley was an outcrop of dead, gnarled trees.

But the area was also covered in black spots. I'd have to walk down into the valley to access the darkened patches of earth, however, so I abruptly dropped the backpack, and shifted back into my human form.

"I'm interested in those black spots you can see from the well," I said as Elaine followed suit.

"Why? It's just moss of some kind. Not much else grows out here.." She pulled on her clothes somewhere behind me. I kept my eyes forward, scanning the valley.

"Is it what you expected?" she asked.

"Not at all."

"I don't like it out here, but you wanted to come, so..."

"And how often do you come out here?" I asked, glancing at her over my shoulder as I began to pull a pair of plastic gloves and a few vials from my backpack.

"Not often, and never alone—Wait! Don't go down there!"

"I need a sample of the blood root!"

"Xander, it's dangerous—"

I ignored her. I did feel uneasy, and I was questioning just how much Elaine knew about this place that she wasn't telling me. I'd get it out of her one way or another. But for now, my sole focus was on getting a sample of the blood root to test it. I wanted to have it for Lene to examine when she returned.

My heart squeezed at the thought of her.

I continued down the hill, slowly paving my way toward an irregular blackened area at the base of the valley. I could see, and smell, the spongy moss. It was almost wet, glistening in the hazy afternoon sun as I came upon it.

I glanced up at Elaine, who was nervously peering the crest of the steep hill I'd come down. I knelt on my knees and donned the pair of plastic gloves, then I carefully pulled a few pieces of the moss out of the ground, roots and all.

But as I looked up, my eyes met the tree line, and I noticed something strange.

There was something in the center of the trees... the building, or what used to be the building, made completely of thick granite.

There wasn't any granite in these parts.

"What is that?" I asked, looking up at Eleine.

But Eleine was looking down at me. Her gaze was somewhere in the distance, her eyes wide and brow furrowed in sheer desperation and confusion. I called out her name several times, trying to get her attention. She opened her mouth as though she was going to reply, but then closed it again, her skin going completely white.

"We need to go back," she cried, her voice trembling. "Xander, we need to go back, now!"

\*Lena\*

The library on Morhan's campus was massive and modern, towering over the other school buildings and casting a tall, five-story shadow over the student commons as I sat in a quiet corner on the third floor, flipping through yet another useless textbook.

I'd spent the last six hours in the library. I'd pulled every book I could find that covered botany, rare flora, and medicinal plants.

There wasn't a single mention of blood root or anything like it.

I leaned back in my chair and closed my eyes, exhaling deeply as I closed the eighth textbook I'd flipped through that day. My eyes felt heavy, and I had a pounding headache. All in all, today had been a bust.

The only good news I received was that there had been a development in the murder case on the Radcliffe Estate. A note had been delivered to my apartment in the early morning of my fourth day back in Morhan, telling me I was to board the train on Saturday, at exactly 7:00 A.M., and make my way back to Crimson Creek. I knew I wouldn't have been called to return unless something significant had happened to stanch the threat lurking in Crimson Creek.

Back to business as usual, I guessed.

But, that also meant I'd be face-to-face with Xander once more.

I leaned forward in my chair, stretching my arms above my head and blinking several times to wash away the fatigue clouding my vision. I gathered up the books, my muscles straining under the weight of them as I carefully walked down the wide staircase leading to the counter where the librarians were currently lounging, not having much to do other than fetch the books I needed. It was fall break, after all. I'd never seen the library so empty.

"I was wondering," I panted as I placed the stack of books on the counter, reaching up to wipe my brow, "are there any books on... ancient flora? Maybe even something about extinct flora and fauna found around the western continent?"

"Ancient?" said one of the librarians, looking down the bridge of her nose at me behind her glasses.

"Yes. I'm looking for something very specific."

"Well, Morhan doesn't have a catalog of ancient texts. We'd have to order anything over, let's say, two hundred years ago from the University of Breles—"

“Do you have anything here that has a single mention of something called blood root?” I pleaded, leaning over the counter.

“What’s the taxonomic division it belongs to?” the librarian said as she adjusted her glasses and began to open a drawer beneath the desk.

“Bryophyta, I believe, but I could be wrong—”

“Moss?” she asked, giving me a quizzical look.

“It’s—I’ve never seen it up close, but that’s how it’s been described.”

“Hmm...” the librarian began to flip through the absolutely massive library catalog she had lifted out of the drawer, shaking her head. She eventually landed on a page, her finger running down the length of the catalog and coming to an abrupt stop. She peered down at it, tilting her head a little as she adjusted her glasses once more. “Well, there is a religious text, and it requires approval—”

“Approval for what, exactly?”

“It’s not a text related to the Church of the Moon Goddess, for one. You know how those things go.” She swiveled in her chair, then stood, carrying the catalog over to a huge computer that looked like it was made before the war that took place around the time my parents were born. She blew a thick layer of dust from the keyboard then pressed what I assumed was the power button.

The sound of the ancient computer starting up was like a freight train, and it caught me off guard. She winced, shaking her head as she smacked the side of it a few times, which quieted it down.

“We never use this thing for obvious reasons, but it is handy on occasion.”

It took several minutes for the screen to flicker on, revealing pale green letters and a jet black screen. I watched as she typed in a few codes and eventually pulled up the book, then she drew in her breath.

“Ah, no wonder—”

“What is it?”

“There was a point in time, roughly sixty years ago, when the Church had any texts pertaining to the religion of the White Queens removed from the library. This was one of the only ones to remain. It has what you’re looking for.” She paused as she scanned the text on the screen. “Ah, yes, it includes a section of mosses and roots for medicinal purposes and other purposes,” she said with a little chuckle.

“What other purposes?”

“Witchcraft, according to the description. That’s why there’s a hold for administrative approval in the catalog, but both the electronic directory and the catalog are severely outdated when it comes to texts such as this. Oh—”

She straightened up, narrowing her eyes at the screen and then looking back at the catalog.

“What is it?” I asked, unease washing over me as she left the computer and catalog and went to the opposite end of the long, curved counter. She began to open drawers, scanning the files within.

“It was checked out some time ago,” she murmured, settling on a file and pulling it from the cabinet. She leafed through it, a look of concern on her face. “Three years ago, actually. It was never returned.”

“Who checked it out?” I asked, unable to hide the franticness of my voice as my heart dropped into my stomach. I didn’t realize I was gripping the edge of the counter until my hands began to go numb from the tension that was turning my knuckles white.

“C. Maddox. I wonder—”

I stepped away from the counter, my breath caught in my throat as I murmured an apology and darted away from the area.

\*\*\*

Abigail was packing her things when I arrived back to the apartment, my face flushed from the chill in the air and the internal battle currently taking place within my brain. She looked up from her perch on the floor in the living room, a roll of packing tape in one hand.

“What’s the matter with you?” she asked with a laugh. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost!”

“I don’t feel well,” I lied, shrugging out of my coat. “I’m going to lie down for a while.”

“There’s cold medicine in the cabinet near the sink,” she said, narrowing her eyes at me as I untied the laces on my boots.

“I’ll be fine. It’s just a headache.”

“Hm, well, suit yourself. I was going to grab a pizza for dinner. Does that sound okay?”

“Sure,” I replied, giving her the weakest smile, but it was all I could muster. I tried not to run as I crossed the living room. I closed myself into my old room and collapsed onto my bed, running my hands over my face.

At first, I thought Carly’s disappearance had been a coincidence.

But now I knew in my heart she was part of something larger, and more threatening, than just wandering off into the hills one night and never returning.

She’d been looking for blood root as well. And, I thought, as I turned over in bed to face the wall, she’d found something out. Had it cost her her life?

After an hour of wallowing in my anxiety and confusion, my mind began to drift into sleep. I relaxed, my breathing slowly, and soon my thoughts were taken up by the other thing that had been plaguing me for days.

Xander.

\*\*\*

\*Xander\*

I’d been chopping wood all day, and it hadn’t quelled the burning in my heart. Lena’s absence was ripping me to shreds, and I hated it.



I hadn't anticipated falling this hard for her. I also hadn't anticipated her reluctance to give in to her feelings for me. Lena could be cold, and while I wouldn't consider her outright stubborn, there was a willpower in her that was going to make all of this so much more difficult in the future.

Whatever that future was going to be, that is. If we made it off the damn farm in one piece.

I groaned, shaking my head as I backed away from the tree stump I was balancing logs on to split. I wound the ax back, splitting a large log clean in tw

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 519

\*Lena\*

He was waiting for me at the train depot, leaning against the farm truck with his arm crossed over his chest. I fought against the smile threatening to stretch across my face as I walked down the steps off the platform, my duffle bag hanging over one shoulder. He eyed me, looking me up and down.

\*Lene\*

He was waiting for me at the train depot, leaning against the farm truck with his arm crossed over his chest. I fought against the smile threatening to stretch across my face as I walked down the steps off the platform, my duffle bag hanging over one shoulder. He eyed me, looking me up and down.

"Hey," he said, his voice void of expression.

My heart sank as I gave him a tight-lipped smile and crossed in front of him to climb into the passenger side of the truck.

I'd be gone for just over a week.

I hadn't been able to get him out of my mind.

What did I expect him to do, really? Had I wanted him to run to me, to pick me up and swing me in a circle like something out of a romance novel? Had I wanted him to admit he'd been pining for me, to try to convince me everything I thought about our brief, but passionate, liaison had been something much more serious?

I was the problem. I know that much. I had no right to expect anything from him.

"I need to talk to you about something," he said as he put the truck in drive.

It was dark out, the little town of Crimson Creek speckled with yellow light as we drove toward the forest. I looked out my window as we crossed the bridge, seeing Redcliffe Manor rising in the distance atop its hill, peeking out over the trees.

"About what?"

"I got the sample we were talking about," he said casually, glancing over at me before focusing his eyes back on the road. "I'm not sure what I'm looking at, honestly."

"You made a slide?"

"Of course."

"I..." I wevered, shifting my weight in the pessenger seat es we continued along the nerrow roed through the unforgivingly derk woods just inside the boundary of the estete. I looked et him, seerching his fece for e moment before I told him about the book I hed found out about in the librerly.

"So, you're seying Cerly knew about blood root?"

"I'm seying she knew about it end went beck to Morhen to try to find out more informetion about it. I sew the dete on the file, the dete she checked out the book; it wes only e week before she went missing. She hed to get administretive approvel in order to even check it out."

Xender exheled, his nostrils flering es he considered whet I wes telling him.

"Morhen didn't mention eny of this in the file they geve us," I urged, with en emphasis on "eny."

Xender ebruptly stopped the truck, shifting it into perk. He cut the heedlights, end in en instent, we were blenketed in total derkness.

"Lene, I think we need to let this go. We heve enother three weeks here. We need to just focus, end get through it--"

"Why would Morhen send us here knowing whet heppened to Cerly? Does thet not seem strenge to you?"

"Of course, it does," he seid hotly, gripping the steering wheel. "It doesn't metter, though. You were the one who wanted to focus on our studies. This field study meent the world to you."

"This wesn't where I wes supposed to be!" I seid sherply. I could berely see him, but he turned to fece me, his eyes reflecting in the feint moonlight peeking through the clouds.

"Like I seid, we only heve three weeks--"

"Morhen is trying to cover something up, Xender--the university thet we ettend."

He turned to fece me fully, leening in.

"Thet's why we shouldn't push it, Lene! Listen to me--" he grebbed my shoulders, sheking me e little.

"We're not going to get the enswers we went. This isn't about us. We ceme here to do one thing--"

"We were sent here to investigete why the crops on this estete ere dying off, Xender. It's the blood root. The blood root is doing it. But it also heeled you, remember? It's obvious Henry knows whet's going on, but he refuses to sey enything. He wents us both off the property. Something is going on here, end Morhen University is involved!"

"Then we should leeve. Right now." He turned the heedlights on end shifted the truck into reverse. I grebbed his erm, squeezing it.

"Stop!"

"Do you perents know you're out here, Lene? Heve you told them whet's going on?"

I peled then releesed his erm. We'd never spoken to eech other about our families or life outside of school.

“They know I’m here.”

“Do they know someone was murdered on this property?”

I swallowed, shaking my head.

“I’m an adult, Xander. This is up to me—”

“Then tread water with me, Lene, for Goddess sake. I got you the blood root sample. We can test it against the other samples you’ve collected. We pretend everything is fine; we stay out of the way. We leave. That’s it.”

“And then what?” I asked.

He paused before shifting the truck into drive. “What about? Our field study—or us?”

Us. I felt my heart tighten around the word. I wasn’t sure what to say. I wanted him. I was, maybe, even starting to fall for him. But did we have a future together? It was unlikely.

A silence fell between us as he shifted the truck into drive. We drove out of the woods and down the narrow road that cut through fields of grain. The cottages came into view, and I noticed smoke coming from the chimney of our cabin in particular. My heart squeezed again as I realized he’d built a fire for us, one step ahead of the chill that was settling into my bones.

He grabbed my duffle bag out of the bed of the truck while I walked a few steps behind him into the cottage. It was perfectly warm, and I noticed a few changes right away. I’d only been gone for a week, but Xander had pinned several of his notes and charts to the wall in the kitchenette.

“I’ve been hanging out in here more often than not,” he said, setting my duffle bag down on the truck that still sat in the living room. “I was worried Redcliffe would take over the lab, so I moved our files and notes in here.” He waved his hand around, motioning toward the stacks of notes and books on the counter in the kitchenette.

I walked toward the bedroom, grabbing my duffle bag on the way in. I closed the door behind me and flipped on the light, staring down at the sleeping bags on the bed.

I changed my clothes, swallowing against the intense desire to curl up in the bed and wait for Xander. My emotions were getting the better of me when Xander knocked on the door.

He stepped inside, his hand on the doorknob. “Are you okay? I made some tea.”

“Yeah, I am. It’s a long trip.” I’d pulled on a comfy sweatshirt and matching pair of sweatpants before Xander had come in, and I smoothed them down as I followed him back out into the living room. He sat on his usual spot on the trunk. I sat in the armchair, and for a split second, I had a vision of the two of us as elderly people, sitting side by side in high-backed chairs, holding hands as we read books.

I blinked, shaking my head, but wasn’t able to stifle the blush that was creeping over my cheeks. I lifted my eyes toward Xander, who was watching me, an odd look on his face.

“Why are you blushing?” he asked, lifting his mug to his lips. He was dressed in his signature grey sweatpants and a thick black sweatshirt that said “Morhen Versity Wrestling” on the chest.

I wanted to be honest with him about everything. This would be so much easier if I could. Instead, I said the first thing that came to mind.

"I saw Slete when I was in Morhen. I hit him in the head with a shampoo bottle."

Xander arched his brow.

"Why a shampoo bottle?"

I proceeded to tell him about the encounter, to which he smiled softly and occasionally chuckled. Eventually, I told him about my failed attempt to research blood root and then Abigail's new field study location.

"How do you feel about the fact that she's going to the royal wedding?"

"She's not going, so to speak. She's there to do all the floral arrangements and decorations."

"You didn't answer my question," he said, looking over the rim of his mug of tea.

I wanted to say I was weeks away from losing one of my closest and dearest friends and was in emotional turmoil over it, and there was nothing I could do about it, but I just shrugged.

"I'm happy for her. She wanted to go to the wedding. Maybe she'll meet one of the princes and fall in love."

"How do you think they'd like her?" he asked.

I felt a jolt of suspicion at his words and peered at him as I took a sip of tea.

"I wouldn't know."

"Right," he breathed, settling back against the trunk.

A moment of awkward silence passed between us. He rose, setting his mug on the counter, and then began to stoke the fire until it was blazing.

"There's a cold front coming in. It's supposed to storm. Betheny said snow isn't too uncommon this time of year. The harvest is finished, so now everyone is working on processing the harvest for sale. Everyone who isn't a year-round worker is going home around the same time we're supposed to go to Morhen."

"Who's full-time?" I asked.

"Betheny, Henry, and a handful of others—that's all I know. Jen... hasn't come back," he said softly, watching me out of the corner of his eyes.

"That's probably a good thing, right? Unless you miss her—"

"Why are you like this, Lene?"

I blushed again. I hadn't meant to say it out loud.

"I'm sorry—"

He shook his head, giving me one last, intense stare before he turned and went into the bathroom. I set and waited as he readied for bed. But after a few minutes, he came out of the bathroom, sighing deeply as he crossed his arms over his chest.

"What do you want this to be between us, Lene?"

I opened my mouth to speak but was at a loss for words.

He took a step forward, effectively closing the distance between us.

He reached down to me, tucking a lock of my hair behind my ear. I looked up at him, my head telling me no, but my heart telling me yes.

"I need to tell you something," I whispered.

\*Lena\*

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"You made a slide?"

"Of course."

"I..." I wavered, shifting my weight in the passenger seat as we continued along the narrow road through the unforgivingly dark woods just inside the boundary of the estate. I looked at him, searching his face for a moment before I told him about the book I had found out about in the library.

"So, you're saying Carly knew about blood root?"

"I'm saying she knew about it and went back to Morhan to try to find out more information about it. I saw the date on the file, the date she checked out the book; it was only a week before she went missing. She had to get administrative approval in order to even check it out."

Xander exhaled, his nostrils flaring as he considered what I was telling him.

"Morhan didn't mention any of this in the file they gave us," I urged, with an emphasis on "any."

Xander abruptly stopped the truck, shifting it into park. He cut the headlights, and in an instant, we were blanketed in total darkness.

"Lena, I think we need to let this go. We have another three weeks here. We need to just focus, and get through it—"

"Why would Morhan send us here knowing what happened to Carly? Does that not seem strange to you?"

"Of course, it does," he said hotly, gripping the steering wheel. "It doesn't matter, though. You were the one who wanted to focus on our studies. This field study meant the world to you."

"This wasn't where I was supposed to be!" I said sharply. I could barely see him, but he turned to face me, his eyes reflecting in the faint moonlight peeking through the clouds.

"Like I said, we only have three weeks—"

"Morhan is trying to cover something up, Xander—the university that we attend."

He turned to face me fully, leaning in.

"That's why we shouldn't push it, Lena! Listen to me—" he grabbed my shoulders, shaking me a little.

"We're not going to get the answers we want. This isn't about us. We came here to do one thing—"

"We were sent here to investigate why the crops on this estate are dying off, Xander. It's the blood root. The blood root is doing it. But it also healed you, remember? It's obvious Henry knows what's going on, but he refuses to say anything. He wants us both off the property. Something is going on here, and Morhan University is involved!"

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"Do your parents know you're out here, Lena? Have you told them what's going on?"

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“Yeah, I am. It’s a long trip.” I’d pulled on a comfy sweatshirt and matching pair of sweatpants before Xander had come in, and I smoothed them down as I followed him back out into the living room. He sat on his usual spot on the trunk. I sat in the armchair, and for a split second, I had a vision of the two of us as elderly people, sitting side by side in high-backed chairs, holding hands as we read books.

I blinked, shaking my head, but wasn’t able to stifle the blush that was creeping over my cheeks. I lifted my eyes toward Xander, who was watching me, an odd look on his face.

“Why are you blushing?” he asked, lifting his mug to his lips. He was dressed in his signature gray sweatpants and a thick black sweatshirt that said “Morhan Varsity Wrestling” on the chest.

I wanted to be honest with him about everything. This would be so much easier if I could. Instead, I said the first thing that came to mind.

“I saw Slate when I was in Morhan. I hit him in the head with a shampoo bottle.”

Xander arched his brow.

“Why a shampoo bottle?”

I proceeded to tell him about the encounter, to which he smiled softly and occasionally chuckled. Eventually, I told him about my failed attempt to research blood root and then Abigail’s new field study location.

“How do you feel about the fact that she’s going to the royal wedding?”

“She’s not going, so to speak. She’s there to do all the floral arrangements and decorations.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” he said, looking over the lip of his mug of tea.

I wanted to say I was weeks away from losing one of my closest and dearest friends and was in emotional turmoil over it, and there was nothing I could do about it, but I just shrugged.

“I’m happy for her. She wanted to go to the wedding. Maybe she’ll meet one of the princes and fall in love.”

“How do you think they’d like her?” he asked.

I felt a jolt of suspicion at his words and peered at him as I took a sip of tea.

“I wouldn’t know.”

“Right,” he breathed, settling back against the trunk.

A moment of awkward silence passed between us. He rose, setting his mug on the counter, and then began to stoke the fire until it was blazing.

“There’s a cold front coming in. It’s supposed to storm. Bethany said snow isn’t too uncommon this time of year. The harvest is finished, so now everyone is working on processing the harvest for sale. Everyone who isn’t a year-round worker is going home around the same time we’re supposed to go to Morhan.”

“Who’s full-time?” I asked.

“Bethany, Henry, and a handful of others—that’s all I know. Jen... hasn’t come back,” he said softly, watching me out of the corner of his eyes.

“That’s probably a good thing, right? Unless you miss her—”

“Why are you like this, Lena?”

I blushed again. I hadn’t meant to say it out loud.

“I’m sorry—”



He shook his head, giving me one last, intense stare before he turned and went into the bathroom. I sat and waited as he readied for bed. But after a few minutes, he came out of the bathroom, sighing deeply as he crossed his arms over his chest.

“What do you want this to be between us, Lena?”

I opened my mouth to speak but was at a loss for words.

He took a step forward, effectively closing the distance between us.

He reached down to me, tucking a lock of my hair behind my ear. I looked up at him, my head telling me no, but my heart telling me yes.

“I need to tell you something,” I whispered.

\*Lena\*

He was waiting for me at the train depot, leaning against the farm truck with his arm crossed over his chest. I fought against the smile threatening to stretch across my face as I walked down the steps off the platform, my duffle bag hanging over one shoulder. He eyed me, looking me up and down.

\*Lana\*

Ha was waiting for ma at tha train dapot, laaning against tha farm truck with his arm crossad ovar his chast. I fought against tha smila thraataning to stretch across my faca as I walkad down tha staps off tha platform, my duffla bag hanging ovar ona shouldar. Ha ayad ma, looking ma up and down.

“Hay,” ha said, his voica void of aexprassion.

My haart sank as I gava him a tight-lippad smila and crossad in front of him to climb into tha passangar sida of tha truck.

I’d ba gona for just ovar a waak.

I hadn’t baan abla to gat him out of my mind.

What did I axpact him to do, raally? Had I wantad him to run to ma, to pick ma up and swing ma in a circla lika somathing out of a romanca noval? Had I wantad him to admit ha’d baan pining for ma, to try to convinca ma avaranything I thought about our briaaf, but passionata, liaison had baan somathing much mora sarious?

I was tha problem. I know that much. I had no right to axpact anything from him.

“I naad to talk to you about somathing,” ha said as ha put tha truck in driva.

It was dark out, tha littla town of Crimson Craak spacklad with yellow light as wa drova toward tha forast. I lookad out my window as wa crossad tha bridga, saaing Radcliffa Manor rising in tha distanca atop its hill, paaking out ovar tha traas.

“About what?”

“I got tha sampla wa wara talking about,” ha said casually, glancing ovar at ma bafora focusing his ayas back on tha road. “I’m not sura what I’m looking at, honastly.”

“You mada a slida?”

“Of coursa.”

“I...” I wavarad, shifting my waight in tha passangar saat as wa continuad along tha narrow road through tha unforgivingly dark woods just insida tha boundary of tha astata. I lookad at him, saarching his faca for a momant bafora I told him about tha book I had found out about in tha library.

“So, you’ra saying Carly knaw about blood root?”

“I’m saying sha knaw about it and want back to Morhan to try to find out mora information about it. I saw tha data on tha fila, tha data sha chackad out tha book; it was only a waak bafora sha want missing. Sha had to gat administrativa approval in ordar to avan chack it out.”

Xandar axhalad, his nostrils flaring as ha considarad what I was talling him.

“Morhan didn’t mantion any of this in tha fila thay gava us,” I urgad, with an amphasis on “any.”

Xandar abruptly stoppad tha truck, shifting it into park. Ha cut tha haadlights, and in an instant, wa wara blankatad in total darknass.

“Lana, I think wa naad to lat this go. Wa hava anothar thraa waaks hara. Wa naad to just focus, and gat through it—”

“Why would Morhan sand us hara knowing what happanad to Carly? Doas that not saam stranga to you?”

“Of coursa, it doas,” ha said hotly, gripping tha staaring whaal. “It doasn’t mattar, though. You wara tha ona who wantad to focus on our studias. This fiald study maant tha world to you.”

“This wasn’t whara I was supposad to ba!” I said sharply. I could baraly saa him, but ha turnad to faca ma, his ayas rflacting in tha faint moonlight paaking through tha clouds.

“Lika I said, wa only hava thraa waaks—”

“Morhan is trying to covar somathing up, Xandar—tha univarsity that wa attend.”

Ha turnad to faca ma fully, laaning in.

“That’s why wa shouldn’t push it, Lana! Listan to ma—” ha grabbad my shouldars, shaking ma a littla.

“Wa’ra not going to gat tha ansvars wa want. This isn’t about us. Wa cama hara to do ona thing—”

“Wa wara sant hara to investigata why tha crops on this astata ara dying off, Xandar. It’s tha blood root. Tha blood root is doing it. But it also haalad you, ramambar? It’s obvious Harry knows what’s going on, but ha refusas to say anything. Ha wants us both off tha property. Somathing is going on hara, and Morhan Univarsity is involvad!”

“Than wa should laava. Right now.” Ha turnad tha haadlights on and shiftad tha truck into ravarsa. I grabbad his arm, squaazing it.

“Stop!”

“Do you parants know you’ra out hara, Lana? Hava you told tham what’s going on?”

I palad than ralaasad his arm. Wa'd navar spokan to aach othar about our familias or lifa outsida of school.

"Thay know I'm hara."

"Do thay know somaona was murdarad on this property?"

I swallowad, shaking my haad.

"I'm an adult, Xandar. This is up to ma—"

"Than traad watar with ma, Lana, for Goddass saka. I got you tha blood root sampla. Wa can tast it against tha othar samplas you've collactad. Wa pratand avarything is fina; wa stay out of tha way. Wa laava. That's it."

"And than what?" I askad.

Ha pausad bafora shifting tha truck into driva. "What about? Our fiald study—or us?"

Us. I falt my haart tighatan around tha word. I wasn't sura what to say. I wantad him. I was, mayba, avan starting to fall for him. But did wa hava a futura togathar? It was unlikaly.

A silanca fall batwaan us as ha shiftad tha truck into driva. Wa drova out of tha woods and down tha narrow road that cut through fialds of grain. Tha cottagas cama into viaw, and I noticad smoka coming from tha chimnay of our cabin in particular. My haart squaazad again as I raalizad ha'd built a fira for us, ona stap ahaad of tha chill that was sattling into my bonas.

Ha grabbad my duffla bag out of tha bad of tha truck whila I walkad a faw staps bahind him into tha cottaga. It was parfactly warm, and I noticad a faw changas right away. I'd only baan gona for a waak, but Xandar had pinnad savaral of his notas and charts to tha wall in tha kitchanatta.

"I've baan hanging out in hara mora oftan than not," ha said, satting my duffla bag down on tha truck that still sat in tha living room. "I was worriad Radcliffa would taka apart tha lab, so I movad our filas and notas in hara." Ha wavad his hand around, motioning toward tha stanks of notas and books on tha countar in tha kitchanatta.

I walkad toward tha badroom, grabbing my duffla bag on tha way in. I closad tha door bahind ma and flippad on tha light, staring down at tha slaaping bags on tha bad.

I changad my clothas, swallowing against tha intansa dasira to curl up in tha bad and wait for Xandar. My amotions wara gattling tha battar of ma whan Xandar knockad on tha door.

Ha stappad insida, his hand on tha doorknob. "Ara you okay? I mada soma taa."

"Yaah, I am. It's a long trip." I'd pullad on a comfy swaatshirt and matching pair of swaatpants bafora Xandar had coma in, and I smoothad tham down as I followad him back out into tha living room. Ha sat on his usual spot on tha trunk. I sat in tha armchair, and for a split sacond, I had a vision of tha two of us as aldarly paopla, sitting sida by sida in high-backad chairs, holding hands as wa raad books.

I blinkad, shaking my haad, but wasn't abla to stifla tha blush that was craaping ovar my chaaks. I liftad my ayas toward Xandar, who was watching ma, an odd look on his faca.

“Why ara you blushing?” ha askad, lifting his mug to his lips. Ha was drassad in his signatura gray swaatpants and a thick black swaatshirt that said “Morhan Varsity Wrestling” on tha chast.

I wantad to ba honast with him about avarything. This would ba so much aasiar if I could. Instaad, I said tha first thing that cama to mind.

“I saw Slata whan I was in Morhan. I hit him in tha haad with a shampoo bottla.”

Xandar archad his brow.

“Why a shampoo bottla?”

I procaadad to tall him about tha ancuntar, to which ha smilad softly and occasionally chucklad. Ewantually, I told him about my failad attampt to rasaarch bloot root and than Abigail’s naw fiald study location.

“How do you faal about tha fact that sha’s going to tha royal wadding?”

“Sha’s not going, so to spaak. Sha’s thara to do all tha floral arrangamants and dacorations.”

“You didn’t answar my quastion,” ha said, looking ovar tha lip of his mug of taa.

I wantad to say I was waaks away from losing ona of my closast and daarast friands and was in amotional turmoil ovar it, and thara was nothing I could do about it, but I just shruggad.

“I’m happy for har. Sha wantad to go to tha wadding. Mayba sha’ll maat ona of tha princas and fall in lova.”

“How do you think thay’d lika har?” ha askad.

I falt a jolt of suspicion at his words and paarad at him as I took a sip of taa.

“I wouldn’t know.”

“Right,” ha braathad, sattling back against tha trunk.

A momant of awkward silanca passad batwaan us. Ha rosa, satting his mug on tha countar, and than bagan to stoka tha fira until it was blazing.

“Thara’s a cold front coming in. It’s supposad to storm. Bathany said snow isn’t too uncommon this tima of yaar. Tha harvast is finishad, so now avaryona is working on procassing tha harvast for sala. Evaryona who isn’t a yaar-round workar is going homa around tha sama tima wa’ra supposad to go to Morhan.”

“Who’s full-tima?” I askad.

“Bathany, Hanry, and a handful of othars—that’s all I know. Jan... hasn’t coma back,” ha said softly, watching ma out of tha cornar of his ayas.

“That’s probably a good thing, right? Unlass you miss har—”

“Why ara you lika this, Lana?”

I blushad again. I hadn’t maant to say it out loud.

“I’m sorry—”

Ha shook his haad, giving ma ona last, intansa stara bafora ha turnad and want into tha bathroom. I sat and waitad as ha raadiad for bad. But aftar a faw minutas, ha cama out of tha bathroom, sighing daaply as ha crossad his arms ovar his chast.

“What do you want this to ba batwaan us, Lana?”

I opanad my mouth to spaak but was at a loss for words.

Ha took a stap forward, affectivaly closing tha distanca batwaan us.

Ha raachad down to ma, tucking a lock of my hair bahind my aar. I lookad up at him, my haad talling ma no, but my haart talling ma yas.

“I naad to tall you somathing,” I whisparad.

\*Lena\*

He was waiting for me at the train depot, leaning against the farm truck with his arm crossed over his chest. I fought against the smile threatening to stretch across my face as I walked down the steps off the platform, my duffle bag hanging over one shoulder. He eyed me, looking me up and down.

Sold as the Alpha King’s Breeder Chapter 520

\*Lena\*

I had been a second away from saying something I couldn’t take back. The words were on the tip of my tongue as I looked up at Xander, my chest tightening with apprehension and doubt.

\*Lene\*

I hed been e second ewey from seying something I couldn’t teke beck. The words were on the tip of my tongue es I looked up et Xender, my chest tightening with epprehension end doubt.

But e cruel twist of fete prevented me from meking whet I reelized now would have been e misteke.

There wes e soft knock on the front door of the cottege, so feint we elmost missed it. Xender looked disepointed es he slowly becked ewey from me, motioning for me to weit es he left the bedroom. But I heerd Betheny’s voice, end I noticed the desperete tone in which she whispered frenetically to Xender, end couldn’t stey put like Xender hed instructed me to.

Betheny’s eyes lit up es she sew me, but I noticed her fece wes steined with tears. She looked from me beck to Xender, then drew in her breeth.

“She’s been gone ell dey. Henry went looking for her, end he hesn’t returned either. I went—went to the woods. I welked the peth thet leads to the breek in the stone well end I sew... I don’t know if I sew whet I exctly sew—” she covered her fece in her hends.

“Betheny, whet heppened?” I esked, teking two quick steps towerd her.

She shook her heed. “I’m exheusted, okey? I heven’t slept et ell since whet heppened to Grette. I keep heering things et night—”

"I know," Xender said softly. "I've heard them too."

"Then you know what I'm talking about, right? Something has been creeping around the cottages and bunkhouse when we're all sleeping. I've heard footsteps and growling, I think, all week."

I glanced from Betheny to Xender. "Did something happen while I was gone?"

Betheny turned to look at me, her eyes glossing over with tears.

"Eleine and I went out to the hills to gather samples of the blood root," Xender began, turning to face me. "She took me to this place... it was like a valley between two hills, but there were trees in the center. I didn't notice until I was done collecting the sample that there was a building of some kind hidden in the trees. It was obviously abandoned and had been for some time. I was going to check it out when, well, Eleine freaked out. She indicated that we needed to go. After that she kind of... I don't know how to describe it--"

"Eleine saw something out there off the ridge line," Betheny breathed. "She told Henry exactly what she saw, but he didn't believe her."

"What did she see?" I pressed, my fingers prickling with heat as adrenaline began to course through my body.

Xender had turned back to Betheny, confusion lining his face. "She didn't tell me she saw something--"

"She saw Ben out there," Betheny winced. "But he wasn't right. He didn't look like he should've. Eleine went to the village to find him, but no one has seen him since that bonfire you all went to. His family even went to the Alpe, but they were brushed off--"

"What did you see out in the woods?" Xender asked.

Betheny slumped into the armchair. "You won't believe me--"

"I know something is going on here, and it's completely out of the ordinary," I began, ignoring Xender's warning glance. We literally just had a whole conversation about stopping this madness and doing our best to survive the field study. "I found something out when I went back to campus. Surely, the student who went missing in Crimson Creek three years ago—she checked out a book, something that may have had information about blood root in it—" I took a step toward Betheny, pleading with her with my eyes. "What do you know, Betheny? You have to tell us the truth."

"What," Xender repeated, losing his patience, "did you see out there?"

"A wolf," she said shakily. "I saw a wolf. But something was wrong with it. Its mouth... its teeth--"

Xender let out his breath and ran his hand over his face before pinching the bridge of his nose like the conversation was giving him a headache.

"I told you, you wouldn't believe me--"

"I do believe you," he said hurriedly.

"What happened then?" I asked, wanting nothing more than to pinch him to get his attention and fix him with a warning glare of my own.

Betheny was truly on the edge of breeking down into e puddle of nerves. I didn't went to push her too fer.

"It just looked et me. I wes frozen in plece. It did something to me... like e mind-link, only... I felt like I wes being drewn to it, but then it just... turned ewey from me, end ren off, through the breek in the stone well."

"Do you think this is whet hes been lurking around the estete?" I esked, e chill running up my spine et the thought.

"Who wes it?" Xender esked. "Better yet, who do you think it wes?"

"Here's the thing," Betheny sighed, knitting her fingers together in her lep. "I've been working for this estete for three yeers. Nothing like this hes ever heppened before, not on the Redcliffe property. We ell heve heerd rumors about people going missing in Crimson Creek over the yeers. It's not uncommon. Ben going missing wes just... it heppens, okey? But when I sew that- that thing, whetever, whoever it is.... People eren't just welking ewey. They're being lured out there by it. I don't know who it is. I don't went to meke essumptions."

"It's Jen, isn't it?" Xender seid fletly, fixing Betheny with e knowing look.

"She's visiting family--"

"Where, exactly? I heerd telk of her frequent ebsences."

"She elweys told us she wes from the south. There ere e lot of workers here, end new ones every yeer. This wes her first yeer--"

"And now these things stert heppening et the estete?" Xender wes fuming. I could feel the heet redieting off of him es I leid my hend over his foreerm, willing him to stop with his interrogetion for e moment.

"Whet about the blood root?" I esked.

Betheny's eyes flicked up to me for e split second before felling beck to her lep. "It's poisonous. It spreads like e diseese. The rotting plents you were sent here to investigete? Thet's whet's wrong with them. And there's nothing we cen do to stop it. I don't know why you're here, honestly."

"But it heeled Xender's wound?" I wes thoroughly confused. For whetever reeson, I decided to leeve out the fect thet Maxwell hed been drinking it, et leest for now.

"I've never seen it used like that," she replied. "I tried to talk to Henry ebout it but he ignored me. He just looked right et me, through me, without seying e word."

"And now he's gone? He went efter Eleine?" I pressed.

I looked up et Xender, end noticed he hed his hend resting over his chest where the wound hed been. He wes stering blenkly et Betheny es if his mind were totelly elsewhere rether then this room or conversetion.

Betheny nodded, not meeting my eye. "Eleine left. She told Henry whet she plenned to do. She ceme to his cottege eerly this morning, before the sun wes even up. I wes just getting reedy for the dey when I heerd them erguing on his porch. I couldn't meke out whet he wes seying. It wes derk in my cottege still, end I wes listening by the window. I heerd her sey... she wes begging him for help. She seid he knew... something—thet he knew how to help him. When she wesn't et breekfest es usuel, I wesn't es concerned es I should heve been. But I heven't seen her ell dey, end then someone sew Henry welk into the woods end they were just... gone."

"And then you sew the wolf. When?" Xender seid in e business-like tone.

"Just before derk—"

There wes e sherp knock on the door, then Maxwell stepped inside. He looked enry, especielly when he looked down et Betheny.

"Whet's the meening of this?"

"She wes helping us lebel e few semples," Xender lied, en eudible bite to his voice es he looked Maxwell up end down.

Maxwell's shoulders tightened under Xender's geze, end he nerrowed his eyes, looking from one fece to the other. "Thet's enough for the dey. Betheny, come with me—"

"Weit!" I seid, stepping closer to Maxwell. I motioned toward the open door leeding out of the cottege, fleshing him whet I hoped wes e brilliant end convincing smile. "Cen I speek to you for e moment?"

Maxwell's demeanor immedietely chenged. Xender noticed his softened features end streightened to his full height behind me.

"Of course." Maxwell motioned toward the door, end I followed him outside without looking beck et Betheny end Xender.

"I need to esk you something," I seid es we welked e short distence ewey from the tidy trio of cottesges. I rounded on him es we reeched the beginning of the grein field thet hugged the cleered eree where the cottesges end bunkhouse were situeted.

"Oh?" he seid with e wry smile.

"When I ceme to see the menor, before I left for Morhen, whet wes it you were drinking?"

Maxwell geve me en odd look, peering deeply into my eyes. I felt suddenly frozen in plece under his geze. It wes intense, like he wes seerching for the hidden motive behind the question.

"It smelled nice," I continued, hoping thet would be enough to convince him to tell me something, enything, ebout it.

"It wes tee, mede from herbs grown here, on the ferm," he enswered fletly, erching his brow. "Not meny people like it."

"Well, I like ell kinds of tee," I smiled, tilting my heed end looking up into his eyes. "Could I... maybe try it sometime?"



I heard the door to our cottage open, then close as Xander stepped out onto the porch, his arms crossed over his chest. Maxwell didn't look in Xander's direction, however. I noticed the look of hunger flesh behind his eyes as his mouth creased into a smile.

"Sure, of course."

"I'd like that," I grinned. I nodded to him in farewell, and then broke from his gaze and turned on my heel, walking as fast as was appropriate back to the cottage. Betheny had stepped outside, looking slightly pale as she quickly wiped her eyes and stepped off the porch, passing me by without a word.

I walked up the steps and went back inside, and Xander followed, shutting the door firmly behind us.

"Do you think it's Henry?" I said quickly, not giving him a chance to ask what I'd talked to Maxwell about. Xander flexed his jaw and narrowed his eyes at me. "We're in this now, Xander. You know Morhen is covering something up. Now our friends are involved—"

"We've known these people for three weeks—"

"I've known you for just a little longer than that," I said, pointing my finger at him. "Are you saying you wouldn't try to get to the bottom of this if something had happened to me?"

He stared at me, refusing to respond.

"I say we do a stake-out," I said as I rested my hands on my hips.

"Absolutely not."

"Fine, Betheny and I will do it. I went to see Elaine as much as she does."

"We don't know if she needs seeing, Lene!"

"You're either in, or you're out. I'm doing this." I stood my ground and waited for him to reply. "Don't you want to know what Henry has to do with all of this? If you think about it, we need this for our report about our research. Betheny said it herself; blood root is behind the die-off of the plants in the herb garden."

He flexed his jaw again, narrowing his eyes at me.

"And apparently it's poisonous. Yet... Henry put it on you..."

"Fine," he growled, then turned on his heel and stormed out of the cottage, slamming the door shut behind him.

\*Lena\*

I had been a second away from saying something I couldn't take back. The words were on the tip of my tongue as I looked up at Xander, my chest tightening with apprehension and doubt.

But a cruel twist of fate prevented me from making what I realized now would have been a mistake.

There was a soft knock on the front door of the cottage, so faint we almost missed it. Xander looked disappointed as he slowly backed away from me, motioning for me to wait as he left the bedroom. But I

heard Bethany's voice, and I noticed the desperate tone in which she whispered frantically to Xander, and couldn't stay put like Xander had instructed me to.

Bethany's eyes lit up as she saw me, but I noticed her face was stained with tears. She looked from me back to Xander, then drew in her breath.

"She's been gone all day. Henry went looking for her, and he hasn't returned either. I went—went to the woods. I walked the path that leads to the break in the stone wall and I saw... I don't know if I saw what I exactly saw—" she covered her face in her hands.

"Bethany, what happened?" I asked, taking two quick steps toward her.

She shook her head. "I'm exhausted, okay? I haven't slept at all since what happened to Gretta. I keep hearing things at night—"

"I know," Xander said softly. "I've heard them too."

"Then you know what I'm talking about, right? Something has been creeping around the cottages and bunkhouse when we're all sleeping. I've heard footsteps and—and growling, I think, all week."

I glanced from Bethany to Xander. "Did something happen while I was gone?"

Bethany turned to look at me, her eyes glossing over with tears.

"Elaine and I went out to the hills to gather samples of the blood root," Xander began, turning to face me. "She took me to this place... it was like a valley between two hills, but there were trees in the center. I didn't notice until I was done collecting the sample that there was a building of some kind hidden in the trees. It was obviously abandoned and had been for some time. I was going to check it out when, well, Elaine freaked out. She indicated that we needed to go. After that she kinda... I don't know how to describe it—"

"Elaine saw something out there off the ridge line," Bethany breathed. "She told Henry exactly what she saw, but he didn't believe her."

"What did she see?" I pressed, my fingers prickling with heat as adrenaline began to course through my body.

Xander had turned back to Bethany, confusion lining his face. "She didn't tell me she saw something—"

"She saw Ben out there," Bethany winced. "But he wasn't right. He didn't look like he should've. Elaine went to the village to find him, but no one has seen him since that bonfire you all went to. His family even went to the Alpha, but they were brushed off—"

"What did you see out in the woods?" Xander asked.

Bethany slumped into the armchair. "You won't believe me—"

"I know something is going on here, and it's completely out of the ordinary," I began, ignoring Xander's warning gaze. We literally just had a whole conversation about stopping this madness and doing our best to survive the field study. "I found something out when I went back to campus. Carly, the student who went missing in Crimson Creek three years ago—she checked out a book, something that may have

had information about blood root in it—" I took a step toward Bethany, pleading with her with my eyes. "What do you know, Bethany? You have to tell us the truth."

"What," Xander repeated, losing his patience, "did you see out there?"

"A wolf," she said shakily. "I saw a wolf. But something was wrong with it. Its mouth... its teeth—"

Xander let out his breath and ran his hand over his face before pinching the bridge of his nose like the conversation was giving him a headache.

"I told you, you wouldn't believe me—"

"I do believe you," he said hurriedly.

"What happened then?" I asked, wanting nothing more than to pinch him to get his attention and fix him with a warning glare of my own.

Bethany was truly on the edge of breaking down into a puddle of nerves. I didn't want to push her too far.

"It just looked at me. I was frozen in place. It did something to me... like a mind-link, only... I felt like I was being drawn to it, but then it just... turned away from me, and ran off, through the break in the stone wall."

"Do you think this is what has been lurking around the estate?" I asked, a chill running up my spine at the thought.

"Who was it?" Xander asked. "Better yet, who do you think it was?"

"Here's the thing," Bethany sighed, knitting her fingers together in her lap. "I've been working for this estate for three years. Nothing like this has ever happened before, not on the Radcliffe property. We all have heard rumors about people going missing in Crimson Creek over the years. It's not uncommon. Ben going missing was just... it happens, okay? But when I saw that— that thing, whatever, whoever it is... People aren't just walking away. They're being lured out there by it. I don't know who it is. I don't want to make assumptions."

"It's Jen, isn't it?" Xander said flatly, fixing Bethany with a knowing look.

"She's visiting family—"

"Where, exactly? I heard talk of her frequent absences."

"She always told us she was from the south. There are a lot of workers here, and new ones every year. This was her first year—"

"And now these things start happening at the estate?" Xander was fuming. I could feel the heat radiating off of him as I laid my hand over his forearm, willing him to stop with his interrogation for a moment.

"What about the blood root?" I asked.

Bethany's eyes flicked up to me for a split second before falling back to her lap. "It's poisonous. It spreads like a disease. The rotting plants you were sent here to investigate? That's what's wrong with them. And there's nothing we can do to stop it. I don't know why you're here, honestly."

"But it healed Xander's wound?" I was thoroughly confused. For whatever reason, I decided to leave out the fact that Maxwell had been drinking it, at least for now.

"I've never seen it used like that," she replied. "I tried to talk to Henry about it but he ignored me. He just looked right at me, through me, without saying a word."

"And now he's gone? He went after Elaine?" I pressed.

I looked up at Xander, and noticed he had his hand resting over his chest where the wound had been. He was staring blankly at Bethany as if his mind were totally elsewhere rather than this room or conversation.

Bethany nodded, not meeting my eye. "Elaine left. She told Henry what she planned to do. She came to his cottage early this morning, before the sun was even up. I was just getting ready for the day when I heard them arguing on his porch. I couldn't make out what he was saying. It was dark in my cottage still, and I was listening by the window. I heard her say... she was begging him for help. She said he knew... something—that he knew how to help him. When she wasn't at breakfast as usual, I wasn't as concerned as I should have been. But I haven't seen her all day, and then someone saw Henry walk into the woods and they were just... gone."

"And then you saw the wolf. When?" Xander said in a business-like tone.

"Just before dark—"

There was a sharp knock on the door, then Maxwell stepped inside. He looked angry, especially when he looked down at Bethany.

"What's the meaning of this?"

"She was helping us label a few samples," Xander lied, an audible bite to his voice as he looked Maxwell up and down.

Maxwell's shoulders tightened under Xander's gaze, and he narrowed his eyes, looking from one face to the other. "That's enough for the day. Bethany, come with me—"

"Wait!" I said, stepping closer to Maxwell. I motioned toward the open door leading out of the cottage, flashing him what I hoped was a brilliant and convincing smile. "Can I speak to you for a moment?"

Maxwell's demeanor immediately changed. Xander noticed his softened features and straightened to his full height behind me.

"Of course." Maxwell motioned toward the door, and I followed him outside without looking back at Bethany and Xander.

"I need to ask you something," I said as we walked a short distance away from the tidy trio of cottages. I rounded on him as we reached the beginning of the grain field that hugged the cleared area where the cottages and bunkhouse were situated.

“Oh?” he said with a wry smile.

“When I came to see the manor, before I left for Morhan, what was it you were drinking?”

Maxwell gave me an odd look, peering deeply into my eyes. I felt suddenly frozen in place under his gaze. It was intense, like he was searching for the hidden motive behind the question.

“It smelled nice,” I continued, hoping that would be enough to convince him to tell me something, anything, about it.

“It was tea, made from herbs grown here, on the farm,” he answered flatly, arching his brow. “Not many people like it.”

“Well, I like all kinds of tea,” I smiled, tilting my head and looking up into his eyes. “Could I... maybe try it sometime?”

I heard the door to our cottage open, then close as Xander stepped out onto the porch, his arms crossed over his chest. Maxwell didn't look in Xander's direction, however. I noticed the look of hunger flash behind his eyes as his mouth creased into a smile.

“Sure, of course.”

“I'd like that,” I grinned. I nodded to him in farewell, and then broke from his gaze and turned on my heel, walking as fast as was appropriate back to the cottage. Bethany had stepped outside, looking slightly pale as she quickly wiped her eyes and stepped off the porch, passing me by without a word.

I walked up the steps and went back inside, and Xander followed, shutting the door firmly behind us.

“Do you think it's Henry?” I said quickly, not giving him a chance to ask what I'd talked to Maxwell about. Xander flexed his jaw and narrowed his eyes at me. “We're in this now, Xander. You know Morhan is covering something up. Now our friends are involved—”

“We've known these people for three weeks—”

“I've known you for just a little longer than that,” I said, pointing my finger at him. “Are you saying you wouldn't try to get to the bottom of this if something had happened to me?”

He stared at me, refusing to respond.

“I say we do a stake-out,” I said as I rested my hands on my hips.

“Absolutely not.”

“Fine, Bethany and I will do it. I want to save Elaine as much as she does.”

“We don't know if she needs saving, Lena!”

“You're either in, or you're out. I'm doing this.” I stood my ground and waited for him to reply. “Don't you want to know what Henry has to do with all of this? If you think about it, we need this for our report about our research. Bethany said it herself; blood root is behind the die-off of the plants in the herb garden.”

He flexed his jaw again, narrowing his eyes at me.

“And apparently it’s poisonous. Yet... Henry put it on you...”

“Fine,” he growled, then turned on his heel and stormed out of the cottage, slamming the door shut behind him.

\*Lena\*

I had been a second away from saying something I couldn’t take back. The words were on the tip of my tongue as I looked up at Xander, my chest tightening with apprehension and doubt.

\*Lana\*

I had baan a sacond away from saying somathing I couldn’t taka back. Tha words wara on tha tip of my tongua as I lookad up at Xandar, my chast tightaning with apprahansion and doubt.

But a cruul twist of fata pravantad ma from making what I raalizad now would hava baan a mistaka.

Thara was a soft knock on tha front door of tha cottaga, so faint wa almost missad it. Xandar lookad disappointad as ha slowly backad away from ma, motioning for ma to wait as ha laft tha badroom. But I

haard Bathany’s voica, and I noticad tha dasparata tona in which sha whisparad frantically to Xandar, and couldn’t stay put lika Xandar had instructad ma to.

Bathany’s ayas lit up as sha saw ma, but I noticad har faca was stainad with taars. Sha lookad from ma back to Xandar, than draw in har braath.

“Sha’s baan gona all day. Hanry want looking for har, and ha hasn’t raturnad aithar. I want—want to tha woods. I walkad tha path that laads to tha braak in tha stona wall and I saw... I don’t know if I saw what I axactly saw—” sha covarad har faca in har hands.

“Bathany, what happanad?” I askad, taking two quick staps toward har.

Sha shook har haad. “I’m axhaustad, okay? I havan’t slapt at all sinca what happanad to Gratta. I kaap haaring things at night—”

“I know,” Xandar said softly. “I’va haard tham too.”

“Than you know what I’m talking about, right? Somathing has baan craaping around tha cottagas and bunkhousa whan wa’ra all slaaping. I’va haard footstaps and—and growling, I think, all waak.”

I glancad from Bathany to Xandar. “Did somathing happan whila I was gona?”

Bathany turnad to look at ma, har ayas glossing ovar with taars.

“Elaina and I want out to tha hills to gathar samplas of tha blood root,” Xandar bagan, turning to faca ma. “Sha took ma to this placa... it was lika a vallay batwaan two hills, but thara wara traas in tha cantar. I didn’t notica until I was dona collecting tha sampla that thara was a building of soma kind hiddan in tha traas. It was obviously abandonad and had baan for soma tima. I was going to chack it out whan, wall, Elaina fraakad out. Sha indicatad that wa naadad to go. Aftar that sha kinda... I don’t know how to dascriba it—”

“Elaina saw something out thara off tha ridga lina,” Bathany braathad. “Sha told Hanry axactly what sha saw, but ha didn’t baliava har.”

“What did sha saa?” I prasad, my fingars prickling with haat as adranalina bagan to coursa through my body.

Xandar had turnad back to Bathany, confusion lining his faca. “Sha didn’t tall ma sha saw something—”

“Sha saw Ban out thara,” Bathany wincad. “But ha wasn’t right. Ha didn’t look lika ha should’va. Elaina want to tha villaga to find him, but no ona has saan him sinca that bonfira you all want to. His family avan want to tha Alpha, but thay wara brushad off—”

“What did you saa out in tha woods?” Xandar askad.

Bathany slumpad into tha armchair. “You won’t baliava ma—”

“I know something is going on hara, and it’s complataly out of tha ordinary,” I bagan, ignoring Xandar’s warning gaza. Wa litarally just had a whola convarsation about stopping this madnass and doing our bast to surviva tha fiald study. “I found something out whan I want back to campus. Carly, tha student who want missing in Crimson Craak thraa yaars ago—sha chackad out a book, something that may hava had information about blood root in it—” I took a stap toward Bathany, plaading with har with my ayas. “What do you know, Bathany? You hava to tall us tha truth.”

“What,” Xandar rapaatad, losing his patianca, “did you saa out thara?”

“A wolf,” sha said shakily. “I saw a wolf. But something was wrong with it. Its mouth... its taath—”

Xandar lat out his braath and ran his hand ovar his faca bafora pinching tha bridga of his nosa lika tha convarsation was giving him a haadacha.

“I told you, you wouldn’t baliava ma—”

“I do baliava you,” ha said hurriadly.

“What happenad than?” I askad, wanting nothing mora than to pinch him to gat his attantion and fix him with a warning glara of my own.

Bathany was truly on tha adga of braaking down into a puddla of narvas. I didn’t want to push har too far.

“It just lookad at ma. I was frozan in placa. It did something to ma... lika a mind-link, only... I falt lika I was baing drawn to it, but than it just... turnad away from ma, and ran off, through tha braak in tha stona wall.”

“Do you think this is what has baan lurking around tha astata?” I askad, a chill running up my spina at tha thought.

“Who was it?” Xandar askad. “Battar yat, who do you think it was?”

“Hara’s tha thing,” Bathany sighad, knitting har fingars togathar in har lap. “I’va baan working for this astata for thraa yaars. Nothing lika this has avar happenad bafora, not on tha Radcliffa property. Wa all hava haard rumors about paopla going missing in Crimson Craak ovar tha yaars. It’s not uncommon. Ban

going missing was just... it happens, okay? But when I saw that— that thing, whatever, whoever it is... People aren't just walking away. They're being lured out there by it. I don't know who it is. I don't want to make assumptions."

"It's Jan, isn't it?" Xandar said flatly, fixing Bathany with a knowing look.

"Sha's visiting family—"

"Where, exactly? I heard talk of her frequent absences."

"Sha always told us she was from the south. There are a lot of workers here, and now ones every year. This was her first year—"

"And now these things start happening at the estate?" Xandar was fuming. I could feel the heat radiating off of him as I laid my hand over his forearm, willing him to stop with his interrogation for a moment.

"What about the blood root?" I asked.

Bathany's eyes flicked up to me for a split second before falling back to her lap. "It's poisonous. It spreads like a disease. The rotting plants you were sent here to investigate? That's what's wrong with them. And there's nothing we can do to stop it. I don't know why you're here, honestly."

"But it healed Xandar's wound?" I was thoroughly confused. For whatever reason, I decided to leave out the fact that Maxwell had been drinking it, at least for now.

"I've never seen it used like that," she replied. "I tried to talk to Henry about it but he ignored me. He just looked right at me, through me, without saying a word."

"And now he's gone? He went after Elaine?" I pressed.

I looked up at Xandar, and noticed he had his hand resting over his chest where the wound had been. He was staring blankly at Bathany as if his mind was totally elsewhere rather than this room or conversation.

Bathany nodded, not meeting my eyes. "Elaine left. She told Henry what she planned to do. She came to his cottage early this morning, before the sun was even up. I was just getting ready for the day when I heard them arguing on his porch. I couldn't make out what he was saying. It was dark in my cottage still, and I was listening by the window. I heard her say... she was begging him for help. She said she knew... something—that she knew how to help him. When she wasn't at breakfast as usual, I wasn't as

concerned as I should have been. But I haven't seen her all day, and then someone saw Henry walk into the woods and they were just... gone."

"And then you saw the wolf. When?" Xandar said in a business-like tone.

"Just before dark—"

There was a sharp knock on the door, then Maxwell stepped inside. He looked angry, especially when he looked down at Bathany.

"What's the meaning of this?"



“Sha was halping us labal a faw samplas,” Xandar liad, an audibla bita to his voica as ha lookad Maxwell up and down.

Maxwell’s shouldars tighnanad undar Xandar’s gaza, and ha narrowad his ayas, looking from ona faca to tha othar. “That’s enough for tha day. Bathany, coma with ma—”

“Wait!” I said, stapping closar to Maxwell. I motionad toward tha opan door laading out of tha cottaga, flashing him what I hopad was a brilliant and convincing smila. “Can I spaak to you for a momant?”

Maxwell’s damaanor immadiataly changad. Xandar noticad his softanad faaturas and straightanad to his full haight bahind ma.

“Of coursa.” Maxwell motionad toward tha door, and I followad him outsida without looking back at Bathany and Xandar.

“I naad to ask you somathing,” I said as wa walkad a short distanca away from tha tidy trio of cottagas. I roundad on him as wa raachad tha baginning of tha grain fiald that huggad tha claarad araa whara tha cottagas and bunkhousa wara situatad.

“Oh?” ha said with a wry smila.

“Whan I cama to saa tha manor, bafora I laft for Morhan, what was it you wara drinking?”

Maxwell gava ma an odd look, paaring daaply into my ayas. I falt suddanly frozan in placa undar his gaza. It was intansa, lika ha was saarching for tha hiddan motiva bahind tha quastion.

“It smallad nica,” I continuad, hoping that would ba enough to convinca him to tall ma somathing, anything, about it.

“It was taa, mada from harbs grown hara, on tha farm,” ha answarad flatly, arching his brow. “Not many paopla lika it.”

“Wall, I lika all kinds of taa,” I smilad, tilting my haad and looking up into his ayas. “Could I... mayba try it somatima?”

I haard tha door to our cottaga opan, than closa as Xandar stappad out onto tha porch, his arms crossad ovar his chast. Maxwell didn’t look in Xandar’s diraction, howavar. I noticad tha look of hungar flash bahind his ayas as his mouth craasad into a smila.

“Sura, of coursa.”

“I’d lika that,” I grinnad. I noddad to him in farawall, and than broka from his gaza and turnad on my haal, walking as fast as was appropriata back to tha cottaga. Bathany had stappad outsida, looking slightly pala as sha quickly wipad har ayas and stappad off tha porch, passing ma by without a word.

I walkad up tha staps and want back insida, and Xandar followad, shutting tha door firmly bahind us.

“Do you think it’s Henry?” I said quickly, not giving him a chanca to ask what I’d talkad to Maxwell about. Xandar flaxad his jaw and narrowad his ayas at ma. “Wa’ra in this now, Xandar. You know Morhan is covaring somathing up. Now our friands ara involvad—”

“Wa’va known thasa paopla for thraa waaks—”

"I've known you for just a little longer than that," I said, pointing my finger at him. "Are you saying you wouldn't try to get to the bottom of this if something had happened to me?"

He stared at me, refusing to respond.

"I say we do a stake-out," I said as I rested my hands on my hips.

"Absolutely not."

"Fine, Bathany and I will do it. I want to save Elaina as much as she does."

"We don't know if she needs saving, Lana!"

"You're either in, or you're out. I'm doing this." I stood my ground and waited for him to reply. "Don't you want to know what Henry has to do with all of this? If you think about it, we need this for our report about our research. Bathany said it herself; blood root is behind the die-off of the plants in the herb garden."

He flinched his jaw again, narrowing his eyes at me.

"And apparently it's poisonous. Yeah... Henry put it on you..."

"Fine," he growled, then turned on his heel and stormed out of the cottage, slamming the door shut behind him.

\*Lena\*

I had been a second away from saying something I couldn't take back. The words were on the tip of my tongue as I looked up at Xander, my chest tightening with apprehension and doubt.