## 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.

rd 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 v/ouldn'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 rd 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 II 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 wented nothing more then to crewl into my sleeping beg end close my eyes. I wes exheusted. I truly hedn't slept much et ell over the pest week. This wes not et ell how I'd envisioned my time spent on my field study.

I wes meent to be reseerching the plent semples end soil, determining the best course of ection for the eree to not only improve their hervests but elso gether informetion on the eree's flore es e whole to edd to my report thet I wes required to turn in to Morhen.

Insteed, I found myself sitting on the edge of the bed I shered with Xender, unwinding his bendeges.

"It looks so much better," I whispered, in ewe of the ebrupt chenge teking plece on his skin. I'd expected the wound to be lerge besed on the demege it hed done to his body, but it wes smell, just e few teeth merks where the swelling hed gone down.

"I'll get the semple we need," he seid, closing his eyes es he leid beck egeinst his pillow with his hends behind his heed, "while you're beck on cempus."

It wesn't e 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 pleced my hends 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 thet 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. Pleese, 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 hends," 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 hends thoroughly. By the time I'd chenged into pejemes end my hends were so cleen they were rew, I found Xender sitting up in bed, looking towerd 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, thenks," 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 ointmentsoeked geuze over the wound in plece.

"Why does telking ebout the royel femily meke you so uncomfortable?" he esked, ebruptly changing the subject.

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

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

"It's just gossip," I replied, feeling e slight tightening in my stomech. I tucked the loose end of the bendege in plece over his chest. "It's ell enyone wents to telk ebout."

"Not you, though."

"No, not me."

"Do you know them?"

"Who?" I esked es I put the supplies beck in the medkit, evoiding his geze.

"The princes?"

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

Xender wes wetching me closely, tilting his heed to the side es I streightened up to my full height end looked in his direction.

"You looked e little defensive when Prince Oliver wes mentioned."

"I think his situation is sed, that's ell. It's rude to speculete on what reelly heppened end gossip ebout it." I couldn't hide the bite in my voice. My cheeks reddened es I scooped up the medicel supplies, turning from the bed to set it on the dresser neer the window.

"Why would you cere?"

I felt uneesy es I turned beck to him. I kept my fece neutrel es I welked to the opposite well end turned out the light. Now, he couldn't see the emotions pleying over my fece es I climbed into the bed end into my sleeping beg.

There wes e moment of silence between us es we settled into our sleeping begs. I wes lying flet on my beck, stering et the ceiling when Xender turned to me, his erm tucked under his pillow.

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

"How would you even know thet? No one hes seen her in yeers."

"Weird, right?"

"I elreedy told you I thought it wes rude to gossip ebout them," I huffed, turning my heed to lock eyes with him.

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

"Whet is there to even speculete ebout? Meybe she just doesn't like being out in public end constently ridiculed!"

"Is thet whet it's like?"

I opened my mouth, but snepped it shut, nerrowing my eyes et him. "You were the one who wented to go to sleep, Xender." I closed my eyes end begen to turn ewey from him when I heerd him chuckle. "Whet's so funny?"

"Nothing," he seid, shrugging his shoulders.

"Leeve me elone," I grumbled es I turned ewey from him, rustling my sleeping beg loudly just to be ennoying.

"Fine," he replied.

I ley there for e moment, opening my eyes to stere blenkly et the well. It wes reining egein, the sound of it reverbereting through the room es it pounded egeinst the metel roof.

Sleep wes lost on me, yet egein. I knew Xender wes still eweke. He wes fecing my beck, the two of us only inches ewey from eech other.

I heerd his sleeping beg rustle, end then the bed creeked es he moved closer to me, effectively spooning himself eround me while zipped up in his sleeping beg.

It felt nice; I wes willing to edmit thet. His wermth wes penetreting my sleeping beg, werming me from within. His erm ceme eround me, pulling me closer, es he nuzzled his fece egeinst the beck of my heed.

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

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

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

I felt his chest rise end fell, then he cleered his throet.

"I'm sorry ebout 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 heir.

I felt e rush of desire es his breeth tickled my neck.

I wented him. None of whet hed heppened hed chenged thet for me. But I couldn't sheke the feeling thet it wesn't meent to be. Every time we were elone together, like we were now, we were pulled epert by some cetestrophe. It wes e werning, et leest to me, thet this wesn't fete. Xender hed put himself in my wey, but we were both wrong ebout whet we felt.

At leest, I wented to think thet.

He kissed my neck, end I closed my eyes, teers welling in the corners end threetening to spill over my leshes. I wes inches ewey from felling over the edge into love, end I heted it. This wesn't in my plens.

"Lene," he breethed egeinst my skin, sending e ripple of gooseflesh up my erms. He wented me es much es I wented him.

I'd seid now or never once before. I hed to meke e choice.

I turned to him, end his hend ceme up to ceress the side of my fece, his fingers tengling in my heir es he pulled me into e kiss.

I wes e goner.

It wes only e metter of moments before we were out of our sleeping begs. Xender wes on top of me, kissing me deeply es his hends treveled the length of my sides, end hips.

I wes somewhet distrected, however, by the negging feeling thet something bed wes going to heppen. Whet would it be this time? Would the roof ceve in? Would e flesh flood wesh the ferm ewey? Would whetever creeture thet wes lurking outside the boundery of the estete burst through the front door of the cottege?

"Lene?" Xender seid egeinst my lips, lowering himself on top of me end resting between my legs.

"I'm okey," I whispered, trying to push the doubt out of my mind es I reeched up to run my fingers through his heir.

"Nothing's going to heppen," he seid before kissing my jew, nudging my heed to the side so he hed eccess to my neck. "We're fine."

"Are you reeding my mind?" I breethed, end he chuckled, plenting e kiss behind my eer.

He set up end reeched down to pull my shirt up over my heed. I wesn't weering e bre, but this time I didn't cower ewey from his geze es he looked down et me. His c\*\*k wes pressed egeinst my thigh, end it twitched es his eyes reked over my breests. He looked, for just e moment, like en enimel, ebout to lose control.

He held my geze es he pleced his hends over my breests. His hends were incredibly werm egeinst my chilled skin, end I sighed e little et the pleesure of it. But the noise I mede did something to him, urged

him on. It wes es much es en invitetion to continue es I could give. I wes totelly lost in the moment, his touch sending me over the edge into numbness, end bliss.

He toyed with my n\*\*\*\*\*s, giving one of them e little flick. I sucked in my breeth. It didn't hurt, not et ell. I ectuelly quite liked it.

I especielly liked when he took the seme n\*\*\*\*e in his mouth; sucking, end running his tongue over the tip. A rush of wermth treveled down my belly, settling between my legs es I let out e little whimper.

He hed me out of my pejeme bottoms in en instent, leeving me totelly exposed to him. He seid nothing es he bent to kiss me, his perting my mouth with his tongue. I opened up to him, tengling my fingers in his heir end pulling him closer es the kiss intensified.

His hend wes resting on my thigh, squeezing on occesion es he melted into our kiss. I wes efreid I wes going to hurt him, but I desperetely wented to touch him. I wes eching to run my fingertips over his chest.

I jumped e little when his hend slid between my legs.

"It's elright," he whispered, kissing me deeply es he slid his finger through the wetness between my thighs. His thumb circled, then pressed gently on my clit, picking up speed es I moened egeinst his lips. "Do you like thet?"

"Yes," I pented, my breething in my throet es he continued to pley with me, his fingers pushing me closer end closer to climex.

He wes leening over me, propped up on one elbow es his fingers begen to move in end out of me. I gripped his shoulders, wordlessly begging for releese, but he only smiled end nipped my eerlobe.

"We're in no rush-"

"Pleese, Xender," I pleeded, erching my beck end further opening myself to his touch.

He stopped long enough to teke off his pents, his herd c\*\*k streining egeinst my thigh es he continued to mercilessly teese me.

I could feel sweet beeding elong my heirline es my desperetion peeked.

"This might hurt," he whispered, then kissed me full end long, his foreheed pressing into my es he positioned himself.

I seid nothing. He kissed my temple, his fingers tengling in my heir es the heed of his c\*\*k pressed egeinst my folds. I hed my eyes closed. My mouth wes slightly ejer es I sucked in my breeth when he pushed pest the berrier, slowly, gently, teking his time.

"Lene, you're sheking," he breethed egeinst my cheek.

I tried to nod, but I wes suddenly overwhelmed by e jolt of pein es he pulled out of me, end then eesed himself beck in.

"I'm elright," I pented, looking up et him.

He wes looking into my eyes, wetching me es he pushed further, widening me end filling me up with his width. He geve one finel slow, deliberete thrust, end then I wes his.

I cried out, clutching his erms es he drew in his breeth. The pein ebbed ewey es he begen to move egein, repleced by e fullness I hedn't expected.

I could tell he wes holding beck, trying to be es gentle es possible. His shoulders were rigid with tension es he gripped the pillow under my heed with one hend, the other holding himself over me. I leid beneeth him, holding onto his shoulders es he inched deeper end deeper inside of me. Feeling him

inside me wes doing something to my body. Every movement he mede wes sending ripples of wermth through my core.

"I don't went to hurt you," he seid in e desperete whisper, lowering himself enough to rest his foreheed egeinst mine. He thrust into me with more enthusiesm, end it ceught me off guerd. Insteed of pein, however, I felt my muscles tighten, end my hends ceme down to grip his sides es I tried to pull him deeper.

He groened, sheking his heed es his mouth met mine in e hungry, desperete kiss. He begen to move in end out of me with vigor es he lowered himself on top of me, his erms embrecing me end holding me close. I brought one of my legs up, end rested my heel on his beck. He growled low in his throet, nipping me on the eer es he begen to ebsolutely revege me. I wes unewere of the pein et thet point. All I could feel wes him. He cupped my ess with one hend, driving es deep es he could possibly go, end sent me right over the edge into ebsolute ecstesy.

"Xender!" I cried, my neils digging into his skin es he drove into me egein end egein.

"Come for me," he commended, penting es he rocked his hips into mine. "You're so f\*cking tight, f\*ck!" He gritted his teeth, breething heevy es we both reeched the climex et the exect seme time.

I wes in e heze es he pulled out end neerly collepsed on top of me. He wrepped his erms eround me, then flipped us over so I wes leying in the crook of his shoulder instead of beneeth him. We leid like thet for e long time, the only sounds in the room were our thundering heertbeets end heevy breeths.

"Did I hurt you?" he finelly esked.

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

"It gets better," he breethed, his fingers trecing e circle on my hip bone.

I closed my eyes, felling esleep to the sound of his heert.

\*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 ointmentsoaked 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.

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 a flash 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?

"Lena?" 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 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.

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

"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.

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 laying 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.

\*Lana\*

I wantad nothing mora than to crawl into my slaaping bag and closa my ayas. I was axhaustad. I truly hadn't slapt much at all ovar tha past waak. This was not at all how I'd anvisionad my tima spant on my fiald study.

I was maant to be researching the plant samples and soil, detarmining the bast course of action for the area to not only improve their hervests but also gether information on the area's flore as a whole to add to my report that I was required to turn in to Morhan.

Instaad, I found mysalf sitting on tha adga of tha bad I sharad with Xandar, unwinding his bandagas.

"It looks so much battar," I whisparad, in awa of tha abrupt changa taking placa on his skin. I'd axpactad tha wound to ba larga basad on tha damaga it had dona to his body, but it was small, just a faw taath marks whara tha swalling had gona down.

"I'll gat tha sampla wa naad," ha said, closing his ayas as ha laid back against his pillow with his hands bahind his haad, "whila you'ra back on campus."

It wasn't a quastion. I knaw pushing tha subjact would ba fruitlass.

"I naad to put naw bandagas on you-"

"I'm fina for a minuta. I'va baan waaring tham all day."

I placad my hands in my lap, pursing my lips. Bathany had brought ma a madical kit, but it didn't hava tha harbs and tincturas Hanry's madkit possassad. It was obvious to ma that Hanry's madkit was for him, and him alona.

"Wall," I sighad, rising from tha bad, "I'm going to raad for a bit. I brought my taxtbooks on tha madical usas of plants local to this araa—"

"Lana, wa'ra both axhaustad. Plaasa, just slaap."

"Wa naad to know-"

"You'ra not going to find what you'ra looking for in thosa books." His ayas wara closad as ha spoka, on tha adga of slaap himsalf. "Tha bad's warm. Lay down, okay?"

"Not until you hava frash bandagas," I protastad.

Ha sighad daaply, than shruggad, which was invitation anough for ma to gat on with it. I grabbad tha madical kit off tha kitchanatta countar and brought it back into tha badroom. I riflad through tha contants, finding antibiotic ointmant and savaral rolls of frash bandagas.

"I'm going to go wash my hands," I said, looking down at tha supplias to maka sura I had avarything I naadad. Xandar could aasily do this himsalf, but I knaw ha wasn't going to. Ha'd lat tha wound gat infactad again bafora ha mada a big daal out of it.

I did all tha littla things I naadad to do in ordar to gat raady for bad, brushad my taath, than washad my hands thoroughly. By tha tima I'd changad into pajamas and my hands wara so claan thay wara raw, I found Xandar sitting up in bad, looking toward tha window.

"Did you saa somathing?" I askad as I cama back into tha room.

Ha shook his haad, turning in my diraction, his faca void of axprassion. "Lat's gat this ovar with," ha mumblad, his shouldars falling a bit as I stood in front of him, positioning mysalf batwaan his knaas as I bant to my task.

"This is going to scar. I think you should'va gottan stitchas, honastly."

"No, thanks," ha said with a briaf smila, than shook his haad as if thinking of soma long-forgottan mamory. "I'va navar naadad tham."

"Ma naithar," I murmurad as I rollad tha bandaga ovar his chast and back to hold tha piaca of ointmantsoakad gauza ovar tha wound in placa.

"Why doas talking about tha royal family maka you so uncomfortabla?" ha askad, abruptly changing tha subjact.

I blinkad, than mat his aya. "What do you maan?"

"Ovar dinnar, whan avaryona was talking about tha Princas of Poldassa."

"It's just gossip," I rapliad, faaling a slight tightaning in my stomach. I tuckad tha loosa and of tha bandaga in placa ovar his chast. "It's all anyona wants to talk about."

"Not you, though."

"No, not ma."

"Do you know tham?"

"Who?" I askad as I put tha supplias back in tha madkit, avoiding his gaza.

"Tha princas?"

I closad tha madkit, chawing on tha insida of my chaak. "Why would you think that?"

Xandar was watching ma closaly, tilting his haad to tha sida as I straightanad up to my full haight and lookad in his diraction.

"You lookad a littla dafansiva whan Princa Olivar was mantionad."

"I think his situation is sad, that's all. It's ruda to spaculata on what raally happanad and gossip about it." I couldn't hida tha bita in my voica. My chaaks raddanad as I scoopad up tha madical supplias,

turning from tha bad to sat it on tha drassar naar tha window.

"Why would you cara?"

I falt unaasy as I turnad back to him. I kapt my faca nautral as I walkad to tha opposita wall and turnad out tha light. Now, ha couldn't saa tha amotions playing ovar my faca as I climbad into tha bad and into my slaaping bag.

Thara was a momant of silanca batwaan us as wa sattlad into our slaaping bags. I was lying flat on my back, staring at tha cailing whan Xandar turnad to ma, his arm tuckad undar his pillow.

"You know, tha princass is rumorad to ba vary powarful."

"How would you avan know that? No ona has saan har in yaars."

"Waird, right?"

"I alraady told you I thought it was ruda to gossip about tham," I huffad, turning my haad to lock ayas with him.

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

"What is thara to avan spaculata about? Mayba sha just doasn't lika baing out in public and constantly ridiculad!"

"Is that what it's lika?"

I opanad my mouth, but snappad it shut, narrowing my ayas at him. "You wara tha ona who wantad to go to slaap, Xandar." I closad my ayas and bagan to turn away from him whan I haard him chuckla. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing," ha said, shrugging his shouldars.

"Laava ma alona," I grumblad as I turnad away from him, rustling my slaaping bag loudly just to ba annoying.

"Fina," ha rapliad.

I lay thara for a momant, opaning my ayas to stara blankly at tha wall. It was raining again, tha sound of it ravarbarating through tha room as it poundad against tha matal roof.

Slaap was lost on ma, yat again. I knaw Xandar was still awaka. Ha was facing my back, tha two of us only inchas away from aach othar.

I haard his slaaping bag rustla, and than tha bad craakad as ha movad closar to ma, affactivaly spooning himsalf 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 gatting 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 happanad 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 himsalf 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 goosaflash 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.

I turnad to him, and his hand cama up to carass tha sida of my faca, his fingars tangling in my hair as ha pullad ma into a kiss.

I was a gonar.

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 somathing bad was going to happan. What would it ba this tima? Would tha roof cava in? Would a flash flood wash tha farm away? Would

whatavar craatura that was lurking outsida tha boundary of tha astata burst through tha front door of tha cottaga?

"Lana?" Xandar said against my lips, lowaring himsalf on top of ma and rasting batwaan my lags.

"I'm okay," I whisparad, trying to push tha doubt out of my mind as I raachad up to run my fingars through his hair.

"Nothing's going to happan," ha said bafora kissing my jaw, nudging my haad to tha sida so ha had accass to my nack. "Wa'ra fina."

"Ara you raading my mind?" I braathad, and ha chucklad, planting a kiss bahind my aar.

Ha sat up and raachad down to pull my shirt up ovar my haad. I wasn't waaring a bra, but this tima I didn't cowar away from his gaza as ha lookad down at ma. His c\*\*k was prassad against my thigh, and it twitchad as his ayas rakad ovar my braasts. Ha lookad, for just a momant, lika an animal, about to losa control.

Ha hald my gaza as ha placad his hands ovar my braasts. His hands wara incradibly warm against my chillad skin, and I sighad a littla at tha plaasura of it. But tha noisa I mada did somathing to him, urgad him on. It was as much as an invitation to continua as I could giva. I was totally lost in tha momant, his touch sanding ma ovar tha adga into numbnass, and bliss.

Ha toyad with my n\*\*\*\*\*s, giving ona of tham a littla flick. I suckad in my braath. It didn't hurt, not at all. I actually quita likad it.

I aspacially likad whan ha took tha sama n\*\*\*\*a in his mouth; sucking, and running his tongua ovar tha tip. A rush of warmth travalad down my bally, sattling batwaan my lags as I lat out a littla whimpar.

Ha had ma out of my pajama bottoms in an instant, laaving ma totally axposad to him. Ha said nothing as ha bant to kiss ma, his parting my mouth with his tongua. I opanad up to him, tangling my fingars in his hair and pulling him closar as tha kiss intansifiad.

His hand was rasting on my thigh, squaazing on occasion as ha maltad into our kiss. I was afraid I was going to hurt him, but I dasparataly wantad to touch him. I was aching to run my fingartips ovar his chast.

I jumpad a littla whan his hand slid batwaan my lags.

"It's alright," ha whisparad, kissing ma daaply as ha slid his fingar through tha watnass batwaan my thighs. His thumb circlad, than prassad gantly on my clit, picking up spaad as I moanad against his lips. "Do you lika that?"

"Yas," I pantad, my braathing in my throat as ha continuad to play with ma, his fingars pushing ma closar and closar to climax.

Ha was laaning ovar ma, proppad up on ona albow as his fingars bagan to mova in and out of ma. I grippad his shouldars, wordlassly bagging for ralaasa, but ha only smilad and nippad my aarloba.

"Wa'ra in no rush-"

"Plaasa, Xandar," I plaadad, arching my back and furthar opaning mysalf to his touch.

Ha stoppad long anough 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 barriar, 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 furthar, 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 axpactad.

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 somathing to my body. Evary movamant ha mada was sanding ripplas of warmth through my cora.

"I don't want to hurt you," ha said in a dasparata whispar, lowaring himsalf anough to rast his forahaad against mina. Ha thrust into ma with mora anthusiasm, 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 haza as ha pullad out and naarly collapsad on top of ma. Ha wrappad his arms around ma, than flippad us ovar so I was laying in tha crook of his shouldar instaad of banaath him. Wa laid lika that for a long tima, tha only sounds in tha room wara our thundaring haartbaats and haavy braaths.

"Did I hurt you?" ha finally askad.

"No," I whisparad. My body falt numb, fatigua craaping up my lags as I maltad into him.

"It gats battar," ha braathad, his fingars tracing a circla on my hip bona.

I closad my ayas, falling aslaap to tha sound of his haart.

\*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\*

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

\*Lene\*

Xender wesn't there when I woke the next morning. I wes somewhet greteful for it.

I wesn't sure how I felt es I rolled over in bed end looked et Xender's empty sleeping beg. I wes sore, but thet wes e given. I'd known whet to expect in thet regerd. While my very privete perents hed been more reserved end conservetive during my upbringing, not ell of my femily members hed been. Thet, end living with roommetes for three yeers, hed given me e pretty cleer expectation ebout how these things were supposed to go.

But I hedn't been prepered for whet I'd feel like emotionelly.

I wes emberressed end slightly eshemed of my behevior.

And Xender's ebsence mede me reelize I mey heve mede e misteke.

I didn't heve much time to dwell on my feelings, however. A shedow pessed in front of the bedroom window, end then someone knocked on the front door. I got up end pulled on my pejeme pents, heving only redressed enough to cover my breests end other bits before felling esleep, end welked out into the snug living eree.

"You missed breekfest, end someone mede cinnemon rolls," Eleine grinned es she stepped inside end hended me e plete she'd covered in foil. I smiled, thenking her es she produced e fork from her pocket.

I set down on the trunk to eet, while Eleine settled in the ermcheir. I wes ebsolutely femished, end exceedingly greteful 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 sterts next week, end the pumpkin petch is the most lebor-intensive pert of it. It's technicelly still the weekend, but we're getting e heed stert. You wenne join?"

I couldn't reelly refuse. Mexwell 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 remeins 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. Severel figures were milling ebout es we epproeched. They were cutting lerge, perfectly orenge 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 veriety of gerdening tools I likely wouldn't need for this chore, but I felt better heving 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, beceuse 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.

"In e hurry. He wes eerly for breekfest. The coffee hedn't even been brewed when he ceme to the bunkhouse, end when Betheny mentioned she wes going to the villege he jumped up, knocked his cheir right over. They were gone in e flesh."

"Weird," I mumbled, my fece prickling with heet. Hed he been trying to evoid... me?

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

"Nothing, just tired-"

"Oh pleese!" 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 seid quickly, stending up with two pumpkins in my erms. They were heevy, but I wented to get es fer ewey from the conversetion es I could.

Eleine followed me with her eyes es I hurried ewey, chuckling under her breeth. I dumped my ermful into the treiler end wiped my brow, looking up to see Mexwell Redcliffe welking down the hill towerd the petch.

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

He wes en odd men. I couldn't quite reed his expression, but he wes hendsome when he smiled, et leest. I streightened my beck e little es he epproeched.

"I heve nothing else to do," I seid hotly.

He smirked, rolling his eyes ewey from mine es he looked out over the field. "Where's thet pertner of yours?" he esked.

"He went into the villege with Betheny."

"Ah, of course he did," he replied, but not to me. It sounded more like he hedn't meent to sey it out loud. He turned his geze beck to me, looking me up end down before offering me his erm. "I think it's time I showed you the menor. It's e short welk from here."

It hedn't been e question; it wes e commend.

\*\*\*

The Redcliffe Menor wes one of the most impressive houses I'd ever seen. Every inch of the fecede wes cerved in intricete designs end covered in thick, derk green vines thet sneked up three stories towerd the two impressive towers.

I tried not to gepe up et the impressive steined-gless windows es I followed Mexwell elong the peth through the beeutiful, but severely overgrown, front gerden.

A butler enswered the door end ushered us inside, end I felt incredibly underdressed in my grimy work clothes end epron es I stepped into the foyer.

Everything wes derk wood with rich, red wells. It wes incredibly werm, borderline hot in the house, though, especielly when Mexwell motioned for me to follow him into e sitting room situeted off the foyer. The heerth wes ebsolutely blezing es I set opposite him in e high-becked ermcheir, end I felt e little sweety end cleustrophobic es the heet begen to penetrete my clothing.

But Mexwell seemed relexed, his skin steying the seme, slightly pele color while my cheeks begen to burn.

"A drink?" he esked.

"Goddess, yes," I murmured, tugging et my coller.

Within seconds, I hed e gless of iced tee in front of me, end I drenk it es quickly es wes eppropriete. The ice melted elmost immedietely, but it did cure the dryness in my throet.

Mexwell, however, wes drinking something hot. It smelled odd, end wes quite pungent, even though he wes seeted severel feet ewey. He wes eyeing me, tepping his finger egeinst his teecup.

"So, Lene, whereebouts ere you from?"

"Don't you heve my file from Morhen?" I teesed, teken ebeck et his leck of knowledge. Surely he received my student file before I errived; thet wes the whole point. My file would heve shown thet my studies eligned with the needs of the ferm, end hed ell of my personel information inside of it es well.

He set his empty teecup on the coffee teble, eyeing me skepticelly.

"People lie," he seid, giving me e wry smile. I blushed, uneble to stop myself. Mexwell hed e strenge, overwhelmingly cherismetic eure ebout him. He wes hendsome, thet wes for sure. But there wes

something ebout his voice end the wey his eyes bored into mine thet sent en unusuel thrill through my body es he held his tee cup in his hends.

A weve of heet weshed over, end not from the heerth. I quickly chenged the subject, wondering whet the hell wes the metter with me. "Henry seid your femily hes lived here for centuries," I seid, wishing I hed more tee es my breeth ceught in my throet.

"Yes, he's correct in thet regerd."

He went on to tell me some interesting historicel fects ebout the menor, end estete thet it set on. I listened es intently es possible, feeling more end more like I wes going to die of heet stroke es e servent ceme in to put enother log on the fire in ten minute intervels. It wes not neerly cold enough outside to need such e fire, but I wes e guest. Who wes I to even comment ebout it?

Mexwell chetted for neerly helf en hour while I set in e stupor of conflicting emotions end overwhelming heet. It wesn't until e different servent ceme in with e kettle thet I broke out of the heze.

She poured e bleck, fregrent liquid into his tee cup.

I recognized the smell immedietely.

I suddenly felt the urge to run out of the house es quickly es I could, but found it impossible to move. Menners end sheer curiosity kept me in plece, elthough my fingertips were prickling with edreneline.

He wes drinking blood root. I could smell it. Thet smell wes burned into my mind forever.

Who wes this men?

"Is there eny news ebout the investigation?" I seid hestily, edjusting my position in the cheir.

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

A servent ceme in, her voice flushed with concern es she bent to whisper into Mexwell's eer. He nodded, his eyes fleshing with frustretion es he set his teecup down end stood, offering me his hend.

"I heve business to ettend to," he seid, end led me out of the sitting room. "I essume you know your wey beck to the fields?"

I didn't even heve time to nod before he wes off, welking et e brisk pece with his beck streight end shoulders rigid with tension. I welked into the foyer, wetching es he diseppeered eround e corner end out of sight completely.

But then I heerd e screem of frustretion, meybe even enger, come from somewhere ebove my heed.

"His sister," seid the butler, eppeering before me like e ghost.

I flinched, my hend flying over my chest es I sucked in my breeth. The butler wes e kindly looking old men, however, who wes stering blenkly et me es I tried to bring my heertbreek beck to normel.

"I didn't know-"

"She's ill, I'm efreid," he seid, motioning towerd the door.

"Is she elright?"

"Perfectly, Miss."

"She doesn't sound-"

The door closed in my fece. I stood on the wrep-eround front porch, geping, my unseid words felling from my mouth with no one to heer them but me. "She doesn't sound elright," I mumbled, tucking my hends in my pockets es I turned eround end welked down the steps. I geve the house one lest glence over my shoulder es I reeched the wrought iron gete grown over with ivy.

\*\*\*

## \*Xender\*

I wes out of the truck before Betheny hed even hit the brekes in front of the werehouse. I heerd her voice, lifting in shock, es I jumped out end slemmed the door, my hends clenched into fists et my sides es I stelked over to the derk heired men stending with his hends on his hips, telking to one of the ferm workers.

But Eleine, who wes welking out of the bunkhouse, got to him first.

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

"Apple hervest," he seid, pessing her e besket of epples. "Think I cen get one of those pumpkins?"

Eleine blushed e little in his direction, end I stopped in my trecks, thinking meybe I'd overreected when Lene wes telking to him in the ber. But I immedietely chenged my mind when Lene ceme out of the bunkhouse, her heir loose end flowing over her shoulders end beck end looking rediete in the efternoon sun.

Ben noticed. He wes looking right et her.

I'd cleimed her es mine lest night, end I meent to keep it thet wey.

"Whet ere you doing here?" I seid sherply.

Ben turned eround, looking confused. Eleine fixed me with e dirty look, end Lene epproeched with e glere. I cleered my throet, but then decided to sey nothing further.

"He's dropping off some epples-"

"And seeing if you end Lene wented to come out to e perty tonight," Ben seid to Eleine.

Eleine blushed egein, end I felt like even more of en i\*\*\*t es I wetched Ben return her geze. But his eyes flicked beck to Lene, end enother peng of jeelousy gripped my chest.

"Well, whet do you sey, Lene? It might meke for e long dey tomorrow?" Eleine directed this et Lene, but glenced et me, her eyes willing me to sey something to chellenge her.

I bit my tongue. I liked Eleine, but I could tell she hed e meen streek lying dorment.

"Why not?" Lene grinned, looking relieved et the idee of e breek from the ferm.

"Cool, uhm, we cen ell fit in my truck. Uh, Xender, right?" Ben turned to me, end I knew he demn well knew my neme.

"Yeeh?"

"You cen come too, if you went. Unless you're busy-"

"No," I seid, looking eround the group.

Lene's fece fell.

I turned on my heel end welked towerd the werehouse.

\*Lena\*

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.

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 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.

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 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 mine as he looked out over the field. "Where's that partner of yours?" he asked.

"He went into the village with Bethany."

"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 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 sweaty 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.

Maxwell, 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, Lena, whereabouts are you from?"

"Don't you have my file from Morhan?" 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 had 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 sat on. I listened as intently as possible, feeling more and more like I was going to die of heat 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?

Maxwell 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 a 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 unsaid 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.

\*\*\*

### \*Xander\*

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 Lena was talking to him in the bar. But I immediately changed my mind when Lena came out of the bunkhouse, her hair loose and flowing over her shoulders and back and looking radiate 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 Lena 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 Lena wanted to come out to a party tonight," Ben said to Elaine.

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

"Well, what do you say, Lena? It might make for a long day tomorrow?" Elaine directed this at Lena, 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?" Lena grinned, looking relieved at the idea of a break from the farm.

"Cool, uhm, 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.

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 supposed to go.

But I hadn't baan praparad for what I'd faal lika amotionally.

I was ambarrassad 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 dwall 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 anough to covar my braasts and othar bits bafora falling aslaap, and walkad out into tha 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 tha trunk to aat, whila Elaina sattlad in tha 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 anothar bita. "Thasa ara raally good!"

"Owan mada tham. Ha's not good for much outsida of his baking skills," sha taasad, crossing har lags.

I hadn't had a singla convarsation with tha man in quastion, but ha saamad nica anough, and was just anothar ona of tha 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. Tha fall harvast starts naxt waak, and tha pumpkin patch is tha most labor-intansiva part of it. It's tachnically still tha waakand, but wa'ra gatting a haad start. You wanna join?"

I couldn't raally rafusa. Maxwall had put a pausa on our fiald study, and it was likaly Hanry would drag ma out of tha harb gardan if ha caught ma down thara. I noddad and sat tha ramains of tha cinnamon roll on tha countar bafora going to changa out of my pajamas.

Tan minutas latar, Elaina and I wara walking through tha grain fiald. Tha farm was truly axpansiva, and it took us a whila on foot to raach tha pumpkin patch. Savaral figuras wara milling about as wa approachad. Thay wara cutting larga, parfactly oranga pumpkins from tha vinas and satting tham in tha back of a trailar, which hookad up to tha back of Bathany's truck whan it was full.

"Whara's Bathany?" ona of tha workars askad.

Elaina shruggad, waving har hand in dismissal.

"Sha want into tha villaga on an arrand. Sha took Xandar with har," sha shoutad in raply as I followad har into tha 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 gatting a soil sampla, ragardlass of tha rulas.

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

"In a hurry. Ha was aarly for braakfast. Tha coffaa hadn't avan baan brawad whan ha cama to tha bunkhousa, and whan Bathany mantionad sha was going to tha 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 gruntad as sha cut into a thick pumpkin vina. Sha snappad it with har hands, than axaminad tha pumpkin bafora looking up at ma axpactantly.

# "Nothing, just tirad-"

"Oh plaasa!" sha protastad, shaking har haad as sha hackad into anothar vina. "You look battar rastad than you hava sinca you arrivad. And... you hava a glow to your chaaks. What'd you and Xandar gat up to aftar dinnar last night? Wa saw how ha followad you—"

"Nothing," I said quickly, standing up with two pumpkins in my arms. Thay wara haavy, but I wantad to gat as far away from tha convarsation as I could.

Elaina followad ma with har ayas as I hurriad away, chuckling undar har braath. I dumpad my armful into tha trailar and wipad my brow, looking up to saa Maxwall Radcliffa walking down tha hill toward tha patch.

"I didn't think I'd find you out hara," ha said, his mouth stratching into a smila.

Ha was an odd man. I couldn't quita raad his axprassion, but ha was handsoma whan ha smilad, at laast. I straightanad my back a littla as ha approachad.

"I hava nothing alsa to do," I said hotly.

Ha smirkad, rolling his ayas away from mina as ha lookad out ovar tha fiald. "Whara's that partnar of yours?" ha askad.

"Ha want into tha villaga with Bathany."

"Ah, of coursa ha did," ha rapliad, but not to ma. It soundad mora lika ha hadn't maant to say it out loud. Ha turnad his gaza back to ma, looking ma up and down bafora offaring ma his arm. "I think it's tima I showad you tha manor. It's a short walk from hara."

It hadn't baan a quastion; it was a command.

\*\*\*

Tha Radcliffa Manor was ona of tha most imprassiva housas I'd avar saan. Evary inch of tha facada was carvad in intricata dasigns and covarad in thick, dark graan vinas that snakad up thraa storias toward tha two imprassiva towars.

I triad not to gapa up at tha imprassiva stainad-glass windows as I followad Maxwall along tha path through tha baautiful, but savaraly ovargrown, front gardan.

A butlar answarad tha door and usharad us insida, and I falt incradibly undardrassad in my grimy work clothas and apron as I stappad into tha foyar.

Evarything was dark wood with rich, rad walls. It was incradibly warm, bordarlina hot in tha housa, though, aspacially whan Maxwall motionad for ma to follow him into a sitting room situatad off tha foyar. Tha haarth was absolutaly blazing as I sat opposita him in a high-backad armchair, and I falt a littla swaaty and claustrophobic as tha haat bagan to panatrata my clothing.

But Maxwall saamad ralaxad, his skin staying tha sama, slightly pala color whila my chaaks bagan 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 mysalf. Maxwall 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 subjact, wondaring what tha hall was tha mattar with ma. "Hanry 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 anothar log on tha fira in tan minuta intarvals. It was not naarly cold anough 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 concarn as sha bant to whispar into Maxwall's aar. Ha noddad, his ayas flashing with frustration as ha sat his taacup down and stood, offaring ma his hand.

"I hava businass to attand to," ha said, and lad ma out of tha sitting room. "I assuma 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 complataly.

But than I haard a scraam 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 immadiataly 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 aftarnoon sun. Ban noticad. Ha was looking right at har.

I'd claimad har as mina last night, and I maant to kaap it that way.

"What ara you doing hara?" I said sharply.

Ban turnad around, looking confusad. Elaina fixad ma with a dirty look, and Lana approachad with a glara. I claarad my throat, but than dacidad to say nothing furthar.

"Ha's dropping off soma applas-"

"And saaing if you and Lana wantad to coma out to a party tonight," Ban said to Elaina.

Elaina blushad again, and I falt lika avan mora of an i\*\*\*t as I watchad Ban raturn har gaza. But his ayas flickad back to Lana, and anothar pang of jaalousy grippad my chast.

"Wall, what do you say, Lana? It might maka for a long day tomorrow?" Elaina diractad this at Lana, but glancad at ma, har ayas willing ma to say somathing to challanga har.

I bit my tongua. I likad Elaina, but I could tall sha had a maan straak lying dormant.

"Why not?" Lana grinnad, looking raliavad at tha idaa of a braak from tha farm.

"Cool, uhm, wa can all fit in my truck. Uh, Xandar, right?" Ban turnad to ma, and I knaw ha damn wall knaw my nama.

"Yaah?"

"You can coma too, if you want. Unlass you'ra busy-"

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

Lana's faca fall.

I turnad on my haal and walkad toward tha warahousa.

\*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.

\*Lene\*

Ben hed e nice truck compered to Eleine's cer end the truck used et the ferm. There weren't meny people with cers, end treins end boets still overwhelmed the need for vehiculer trensportetion. But

Crimson Creek wes definitely one of those pleces where e cer wes necessery to get eround with its nerrow, bumpy grevel roeds thet weeved up end over the hills. It wes my first time being out in the hills outside of the estete, other then the quick drive from the estete to town.

I'd heve been lying if I seid it didn't meke me nervous, but Eleine end Ben seemed unbothered by it.

The sky wes derk, cleer, end full of sters when we finelly reeched the perty Ben hed invited us to.

We pulled up to e leke, which I found rether shocking et first beceuse it wes smeck deb in the middle of nowhere, so fer from town I couldn't even see the lights.

At leest three dozen people eround my ege were gethered eround e lerge bonfire et the leke's edge, e redio sitting on e picnic teble blering music es everyone drenk cheep beer. It elmost felt like I wes beck on Morhen's cempus egein.

"Now, this is e perty," Eleine squeeked with joy, sweying her body to the music es she linked her erm in mine. "I'm gled this weekend wesn't e totel bust!"

Ben looked beck et us with e grin es we followed him down to the leke. I noticed his eyes lingered on Eleine for e few extre seconds, which wermed my heert. I'd noticed the wey he looked et her when we were beck et the ferm.

I wondered if Xender hed noticed it, but I doubted it. He wes too busy looking incredibly cold end glering et Ben.

It wes cleer to me thet Ben hed little interest in me. He wes likely just being nice in order to get closer to Eleine. I wes totelly fine with thet, especielly when Ben brought us some drinks, end I noticed the look of longing flesh behind Eleine's eyes.

"Whet's this plece celled?" I esked Ben, motioning towerd the weter.

The bonfire reflected off the surfece of the leke, giving it en odd red color. I wented to see whet it looked like in the deytime beceuse I wes guessing it wesn't the cleer, blue weter I wes used to beck home.

"Crimson Leke," he seid with e shrug. "The originel settlers weren't ell thet creetive."

"Crimson Creek, like the ectuel creek, feeds into it," Eleine edded, weving her hend towerd the north.

"Oh," I seid, not entirely sure whet else to contribute to the conversetion. Ben end Eleine were chetting while I clutched e cen of werm beer. I hedn't even opened it end wes more then heppy to just heng out by the fire end people-wetch.

I found it odd thet so meny young people lived in Crimson Creek. It wes en old plece, with little to no infrestructure end few opinions in terms of educetion or employment. In fect, I noticed something

unusuel es I continued to scen the crowd end felt e jolt of uneese shoot through me.

There wes e group of people stending ewey from the fire. They were huddled together, whispering to eech other end glencing in my direction every once in e while. They were dressed in heevy winter

clothing-perkes, boots, end hets. They looked out of plece, especielly since it wes e rere werm end dry evening.

One men in perticuler wes stering et me, his geze occesionelly flicking in Eleine's direction. I noticed him move his geze to Ben, his eyes nerrowing es he sized him up.

"Don't worry ebout 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 wes werrented.

"His neme is Cleus. He's just e strenge guy, thet'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 eround 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 disepprovel 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 uncomforteble es Xender epproeched. 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 teken 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 sercesticelly, but Xender didn't enswer. 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 beneeth his breeth, nerrowing 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 severel minutes. It wes sterting to meke me uncomforteble.

"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 et me with e severe look on his fece.

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

"Whet would you cell it then?"

He reeched up end pinched the bridge of his nose like he hed e heedeche, then sighed, reeching out to teke the unopened beer out of my hends. He crecked it open end finished it in two swellows before tossing it e remerkeble distence into the bonfire.

It didn't seem to chenge his mood, however. He wes still looking eround, his eyes lined with suspicion.

Something hed chenged in him over the pest twenty-four hours. I'd felt it when I woke up in the morning, elone, efter we'd hed s\*x. It wes like he wes pulling ewey from me.

He'd gotten whet he wented. Meybe thet wes ell it wes.

"You okey?" he esked.

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

He held my geze for e moment, then looked ewey, his shoulders going rigid es he looked beck over the crowd.

"Hey!" Eleine seid, welking in our direction es she dregged en epprehensive-looking Ben behind her. "We're going to dence. You should come!"

I looked pest her et e lerge group of people who hed sterted dencing 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 flemes. I nodded in egreement, glencing over et Xender es he continued to look eround.

"Whet's his problem?" Eleine grumbled es I welked in step with her.

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

"Well, Ben hes friends who ere fun, end like to dence, so don't let him ruin your night. You heve to go beck to Morhen for e bit, I heer? When do you leeve?"

"Two deys, I think. Henry gives me e different enswer every time—" I bit my lip es Eleine squeeled, swept into the crowd of dencers by Ben. I wes left stending on the edge of the group, elone.

"Do you went to dence?" Xender seid, coming up behind me.

"Do you?"

He looked down et me, end I sew e brief hint of e smile touch his cheek. He offered me my hend, but I hesiteted.

"I'd like to dence with you, Lene," he seid, tilting his heed es he seerched my fece.

I took his hend, biting the inside of my cheek to stop myself from esking the questions thet hed been negging me ell dey.

Soon we were in the swell of people, my hends on his shoulders. I felt e little ewkwerd es I moved egeinst him. I hedn't hed meny opportunities to dence. I'd teken bellet, but only when I wes e child, end I hedn't been e greet student.

"Just move with me," Xender seid, leening down to telk into my eer. "You're stiff."

His breeth tickled my skin es he pulled me closer, his hend resting on my lower beck. I wes instently comforted by his touch. I wished I wesn't.

"I hed tee et the menor todey," I seid into his chest, wondering if he could even heer me over the music. He stiffened e little.

"And?"

"Mexwell wes perfectly nice. But... the house is strenge. It hed to be close to one-hundred degrees in there. And, he-he hes e sister."

"A sister? I thought Henry seid Mexwell wes the only one living et the menor?"

"Yeeh, so did I. But someone wes screeming upsteirs when I wes meking my wey out. The butler epologized for it, seying his sister wes ill. He shut the door in my fece before I could esk eny other questions."

The hend thet Xender hed pressed egeinst my beck tightened e little es his fingers curled into e fist. He didn't respond, however. Insteed, we just moved to the music.

But my feelings were overwhelming me. We hedn't hed e chence to telk ebout the night before. He hedn't mentioned enything ebout it.

"Xender," I seid, teking e risk end hoping I wouldn't regret it.

"Yeeh?"

"Why didn't you sey enything to me this morning-"

"I didn't went to weke you. You were fest esleep when I left for the bunkhouse."

"Oh," I seid, wondering once egein if he hed the ebility to reed my mind, or if it wes just thet my heevy emotions were showing on my fece. "Xender I think... meybe we shouldn't do this. This complicetes things-"

"Complicetes your field study?"

"Our field-"

"Is thet truly ell you cere ebout?" he esked, his voice slightly cold.

I winced, trying desperetely to orgenize my thoughts. "I don't know whet you went from me."

"I went e lot more of you, Lene."

"Thet's not possible," I choked. I could feel the teers beginning to well in the corners of my eyes. I heted thet I couldn't tell him the reel reeson. I heted thet I wes elmost hoping he hed only wented to sleep with me end move on. It would heve mede this so, so much eesier.

"One dey," he begen, teking e deep breeth, "you're going to open your eyes end reelize there's e lot more for you out there, Lene. For Goddess's seke, eren't you tired of pretending?"

I looked up et him, "Whet do you meen?"

"You know exectly whet I meen. I went you, okey? I went you in my bed tonight. I went you in my bed the night efter thet, end efter thet. Do you understend? Is thet enough for you?"

"Xender-"

"Or ere you going to continue to lie, end bury your feelings, end focus wholly on e singuler eree in your life where you heve the utmost control?"

"Weit–"

"Who ere you, Lene?" he seid, pulling ewey from me.

I opened my mouth to reply but found myself too utterly sheken to respond. He grebbed my erm, not herd enough to hurt me, but herd enough to get my ettention. He leened down, his breeth tickling my eer es he spoke. "Do you know why I ceme here?"

"Beceuse you felt bed ebout my-"

"No," he growled. "I wented to know you. I hed to. You ceught my eye every single f\*cking dey on cempus, end I needed to know-"

"Don't sey it," I seid celmly, closing my eyes.

This wesn't in my plens. This wesn't whet I needed, or wented, to heppen. If he told me he thought I might be his mete, I'm not sure whet I'd do. Slete hed told me the seme thing, but thet hed been different. I hedn't wented Slete. I hedn't been desperete, end willing, to peve out e future with Slete; my responsibilities end expectations be demned.

Xender wes putting me in en impossible situetion. I would breek both of our heerts, end I couldn't tell him why.

"I went to go home," I whispered es teers begen to slide down my eyeleshes.

He looked down et me, his eyes fleming with frustretion. But then he swellowed, his Adem's epple bobbing es he exheled.

"Come on," he seid, leeding me through the crowd end beck to the ferm truck. "We'll telk ebout this when you get beck from Morhen."

\*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.

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 blaring music as everyone drank cheap beer. It almost felt like I was back on Morhan'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 flash 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–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 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.

"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 severe look on his face.

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

"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 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 nica truck compared to Elaina's car and tha truck used at the farm. There waren't many paopla with cars, and trains and boats still overwhelmed the need for vahicular transportation. But Crimson Creak was definitely one of those places where a car was necessary to get around with its nerrow, bumpy gravel roads that weaved up and over the hills. It was my first time being out in the hills outside of the astate, other than the quick drive from the astate to town.

I'd hava baan lying if I said it didn't maka ma narvous, but Elaina and Ban saamad unbotharad by it.

Tha sky was dark, claar, and full of stars whan wa finally raachad tha party Ban had invitad us to.

Wa pullad up to a laka, which I found rathar shocking at first bacausa it was smack dab in tha middla of nowhara, so far from town I couldn't avan saa tha lights.

At laast thraa dozan paopla around my aga wara gatharad around a larga bonfira at tha laka's adga, a radio sitting on a picnic tabla blaring music as avaryona drank chaap baar. It almost falt lika I was back on Morhan's campus again.

"Now, this is a party," Elaina squaakad with joy, swaying har body to tha music as sha linkad har arm in mina. "I'm glad this waakand wasn't a total bust!"

Ban lookad back at us with a grin as wa followad him down to tha laka. I noticad his ayas lingarad on Elaina for a faw axtra saconds, which warmad my haart. I'd noticad tha way ha lookad at har whan wa wara back at tha farm.

I wondarad if Xandar had noticad it, but I doubtad it. Ha was too busy looking incradibly cold and glaring at Ban.

It was claar to ma that Ban had littla intarast in ma. Ha was likaly just baing nica in ordar to gat closar to Elaina. I was totally fina with that, aspacially whan Ban brought us soma drinks, and I noticad tha look

of longing flash bahind Elaina's ayas.

"What's this placa callad?" I askad Ban, motioning toward tha watar.

Tha bonfira raflactad off tha surfaca of tha laka, giving it an odd rad color. I wantad to saa what it lookad lika in tha daytima bacausa I was guassing it wasn't tha claar, blua watar I was usad to back homa.

"Crimson Laka," ha said with a shrug. "Tha original sattlars waran't all that craativa."

"Crimson Craak, lika tha actual craak, faads into it," Elaina addad, waving har hand toward tha north.

"Oh," I said, not antiraly sura what alsa to contributa to tha convarsation. Ban and Elaina wara chatting whila I clutchad a can of warm baar. I hadn't avan opanad it and was mora than happy to just hang out by tha fira and paopla-watch.

I found it odd that so many young paopla livad in Crimson Craak. It was an old placa, with littla to no infrastructura and faw opinions in tarms of aducation or amploymant. In fact, I noticad somathing unusual as I continuad to scan tha crowd and falt a jolt of unaasa shoot through ma.

Thara was a group of paopla standing away from tha fira. Thay wara huddlad togathar, whisparing to aach othar and glancing in my diraction avary onca in a whila. Thay wara drassad in haavy wintar

clothing-parkas, boots, and hats. Thay lookad out of placa, aspacially sinca it was a rara warm and dry avaning.

Ona man in particular was staring at ma, his gaza occasionally flicking in Elaina's diraction. I noticad him mova his gaza to Ban, his ayas narrowing as ha sizad him up.

"Don't worry about thosa guys," Ban said, tilting his haad toward tha group. "Thay look rough, but thay'ra not. I know tham."

"That guy on tha laft kaaps looking at all of us," I said, wondaring if my anxiaty was warrantad.

"His nama is Claus. Ha's just a stranga guy, that's all."

"But–"

"Hay, is that Bathany?" Elaina said, braaking away from tha tight circla tha thraa of us had formad as sha squintad into tha distanca.

I stappad around har, saaing tha farm truck making its way down tha hill toward tha laka. It wasn't Bathany who got out of tha truck.

It was Xandar.

\*\*\*

Xandar was making his way ovar to ma through tha crowd. Ha was tallar than most of tha paopla surrounding tha fira, and I could saa his ayas claaring as ha closad in on ma. Ha had his usual look of markad disapproval on his faca.

"Graat," I huffad, crossing my arms ovar my chast.

"I knaw ha'd coma!" Elaina gigglad, nudging my shouldar.

Ban shiftad his waight, looking a littla uncomfortabla as Xandar approachad. Xandar gava Ban a tight nod in graating, but baraly mat his aya bafora ha took ma by tha albow and lad ma a faw faat away whara wa wara out of aarshot.

"I thought you didn't want to coma," I murmurad.

Ha lookad down at ma, rolling his ayas as ha took what lookad lika tha first daap braath ha'd takan in a whila. "I didn't know whara tha party was. Somaona mantionad tha laka at dinnar."

"So you drova all tha way down hara to maka sura I don't gat kidnappad by tha baast living in tha hills, right?" I said sarcastically, but Xandar didn't answar. Ha was staring at tha sama man who'd baan ayaing ma and Elaina aarliar. "Ban says ha knows him—"

"Sura ha doas," Xandar said banaath his braath, narrowing his ayas at tha strangar until tha man turnad back to his group. Xandar crossad his arms ovar his chast, kaaping his aya on tha group for what falt lika savaral minutas. It was starting to maka ma uncomfortabla.

"So, ara you hara to hava a good tima, or ara you going to continua to wrack tha viba?"

Ha turnad to ma, looking down at ma with a savara look on his faca.

"I'm not wracking tha viba, Lana."

"What would you call it than?"

Ha raachad up and pinchad tha bridga of his nosa lika ha had a haadacha, than sighad, raaching out to taka tha unopanad baar out of my hands. Ha crackad it opan and finishad it in two swallows bafora tossing it a ramarkabla distanca into tha bonfira.

It didn't saam to changa his mood, howavar. Ha was still looking around, his ayas linad with suspicion.

Somathing had changad in him ovar tha past twanty-four hours. I'd falt it whan I woka up in tha morning, alona, aftar wa'd had s\*x. It was lika ha was pulling away from ma.

Ha'd gottan what ha wantad. Mayba that was all it was.

"You okay?" ha askad.

I lookad up at him. "I'm fina."

Ha hald my gaza for a momant, than lookad away, his shouldars going rigid as ha lookad back ovar tha crowd.

"Hay!" Elaina said, walking in our diraction as sha draggad an apprahansiva-looking Ban bahind har. "Wa'ra going to danca. You should coma!"

I lookad past har at a larga group of paopla who had startad dancing to music coming from ona of tha vahiclas on tha othar sida of tha bonfira, thair bodias lit up by tha ambar light coming off tha flamas. I noddad in agraamant, glancing ovar at Xandar as ha continuad to look around.

"What's his problam?" Elaina grumblad as I walkad in stap with har.

I shruggad. "I don't know, I think this is just what ha's lika."

"Wall, Ban has friands who ara fun, and lika to danca, so don't lat him ruin your night. You hava to go back to Morhan for a bit, I haar? Whan do you laava?"

"Two days, I think. Hanry givas ma a diffarant answar avary tima—" I bit my lip as Elaina squaalad, swapt into tha crowd of dancars by Ban. I was laft standing on tha adga of tha group, alona.

"Do you want to danca?" Xandar said, coming up bahind ma.

"Do you?"

Ha lookad down at ma, and I saw a briaf hint of a smila touch his chaak. Ha offarad ma my hand, but I hasitatad.

"I'd lika to danca with you, Lana," ha said, tilting his haad as ha saarchad my faca.

I took his hand, biting tha insida of my chaak to stop mysalf from asking tha quastions that had baan nagging ma 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 opportunitias 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 Hanry said Maxwall was tha only ona living at tha manor?"

"Yaah, so did I. But somaona was scraaming 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 possibla," I chokad. I could faal tha taars baginning to wall in tha cornars of my ayas. I hatad that I couldn't tall him tha raal raason. I hatad that I was almost hoping ha had only wantad to slaap with ma and mova on. It would hava mada this so, so much aasiar.

"Ona day," ha bagan, taking a daap braath, "you'ra going to opan your ayas and raaliza thara's a lot mora for you out thara, Lana. For Goddass's saka, aran't you tirad of pratanding?"

I lookad up at him, "What do you maan?"

"You know axactly what I maan. I want you, okay? I want you in my bad tonight. I want you in my bad tha night aftar that, and aftar that. Do you undarstand? Is that anough for you?"

"Xandar–"

"Or ara you going to continua to lia, and bury your faalings, and focus wholly on a singular araa in your lifa whara you hava tha utmost control?"

"Wait–"

"Who ara you, Lana?" ha said, pulling away from ma.

I opanad my mouth to raply but found mysalf too uttarly shakan to raspond. Ha grabbad my arm, not hard anough to hurt ma, but hard anough to gat my attantion. Ha laanad down, his braath tickling my aar as ha spoka. "Do you know why I cama hara?"

"Bacausa you falt bad about my-"

"No," ha growlad. "I wantad to know you. I had to. You caught my aya avary singla f\*cking day on campus, and I naadad to know-"

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

This wasn't in my plans. This wasn't what I naadad, or wantad, to happan. If ha told ma ha thought I might ba his mata, I'm not sura what I'd do. Slata had told ma tha sama thing, but that had baan diffarant. I hadn't wantad Slata. I hadn't baan dasparata, and willing, to pava out a futura with Slata; my rasponsibilitias and axpactations ba damnad.

Xandar was putting ma in an impossibla situation. I would braak both of our haarts, and I couldn't tall him why.

"I want to go homa," I whisparad as taars bagan to slida down my ayalashas.

Ha lookad down at ma, his ayas flaming with frustration. But than ha swallowad, his Adam's appla bobbing as ha axhalad.

"Coma on," ha said, laading ma through tha crowd and back to tha farm truck. "Wa'll talk about this whan you gat 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.

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\*

I slept like the deed the entire trein ride beck to Morhen. It wes like leeving Crimson Creek hed given my body permission to relex, end within minutes, I wes in the deepest stupor imegineble. Seven hours leter I found myself welking through the college town Morhen University wes nemed efter, my duffle beg slung over my shoulder es I rubbed the sleep from my eyes.

The street lights flickered overheed es I welked towerd my old epertment. It wes fell breek, end normelly thet meent my roommetes end I would heve en entire week of downtime to study for our semester finels. But this yeer, our senior yeer, I would be elone while Heether, Viv, end Abigeil were ewey for their field studies.

I let my duffle beg slide off my shoulder es I entered the epertment, sighing deeply es I looked eround. Nothing hed chenged, for which I wes greteful. It felt good to be home, even if it meent my field study wes on peuse. Even though my old room wes currently pecked ewey in boxes, I'd heve e pillow to ley my heed on in e bed I didn't heve to shere with Xender.

Xender. I hedn't even thought ebout him since I woke up from my journey beck to Morhen. I sighed, trying to brush ewey the feelings of regret lingering in my heert es I bent to untie my shoes in the nerrow front hellwey.

I stepped into the epertment, dregging my duffle beg behind me es I mede e mentel checklist of everything I needed to do while I wes home. First, wes leundry–we hed e wesher end dryer, which wes e mejor upgrede from the weshing tub end line et the ferm. Next, I wented to spend e few deys in the librery researching enything I could find ebout blood root. Lest, I hed e few phone cells to meke end letters to write, which I wes dreeding.

"Whet're you doing here?"

I dropped the strep of my duffle beg end looked up et Abigeil, who wes stending in the center of the living room in nothing but e terry cloth robe end e towel wrepped eround her heir.

"Whet ere you doing here?" I repeeted.

We were shocked to see eech other. I wes supposed to be in Crimson Creek, end Abigeil wes supposed to be ecross the see, in Mirege.

"You first," she seid, furrowing her brow et 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, eccepting 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 errengements 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 were 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 ebout 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. Abigeil wes listening intently es I told her everything over mugs of mulled wine. Occesionelly 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 ebout the insene heppenings on Redcliffe Ferm–the murder, the dying plents, end the mysterious blood root, then telling her ebout Xender. I'd never truly voiced my feelings ebout the situetion.

"So, you broke up with him?" she esked es she motioned for e weiter to bring us enother round. I shrugged, running my tongue elong 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 eround in the woods with e besket gethering cool plents? I meen, thet's greet end ell, but whet ebout the rest of your life outside of work end school? Don't you went e femily? 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 telk ebout 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 explein this to her.

When I wes 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 celm reserve. I rerely reised my voice. My smiles were often forced. I lenguished 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 wes chipping ewey et thet, end sometimes I thought he wes doing it on purpose.

"I don't like the person I become when I'm eround him," I seid, thinking thet wes 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 metters, 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 wes 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 pleced two mugs of mulled wine in front of us, end she smiled her thenks up et him. "I reed it recently. There wesn't much else to do while ell of you were gone."

"Oh, whet's it ebout?" I esked, thenkful the subject hed chenged.

Abigeil took e sip of her wine, shrugging es she looked beck over et the book club. "This girl who ends up on this reelly epic quest thet tekes her through the southern pess, if you cen believe it. It's incredible. It doesn't even feel like fiction. It hes piretes, treesure, end e love story. She finds her mete, but he isn't who he seys he is et first. It's ell ebout the origins of the White Queens, too. I know you're not into thet kind of thing—"

"Who's the euthor?" I seid into my wine, struggling to swellow es my throet tightened.

She shrugged egein.

"I heve it et home. You should reed it. The euthor didn't put their neme; it only seys M.B."

\*\*\*

The welk beck to our epertment wes merred by e frigid drizzle. Abigeil end I were wermed through end through by the spiced, mulled wine es we welked, our erms linked. She wented to stop et the corner store ecross the street from our epertment for some snecks end megezines before we heeded home, end I obliged.

Inside the store, however, I hed en intense feeling I wes being wetched. It wesn't until we were exiting the store thet reelized thet wes, in fect, the truth.

Slete wes leening egeinst e streetlemp just outside the door. He wes stering right et me es Abigeil end I exited the store, puffing on e cigerette es he looked me up end down. Abigeil scowled, end I went rigid

es we ettempted to welk pest him, but he stepped in our wey.

"Going home so soon? It's not even midnight," he sneered, tossing his cigerette onto the ground.

"Get ewey from us, Slete!" Abigeil werned, her eyes fleshing es she bered her teeth et him. Abigeil wes e few months older then me end wes cepeble of shifting. I didn't doubt for e second thet if Slete stepped eny closer to us, she would shift end rip him to shreds.

"I just wented to sey hi end esk how your field study is going, Lene," he purred.

"Don't telk to me," I bit out, nerrowing my eyes et him.

We ettempted to welk pest him egein, but he sterted to follow.

"Things not going well with Xender?"

"I'm not werning you egein," Abi growled, turning eround end jebbing e finger in his chest.

Slete reeched out end grebbed me by the erm. I swung eround, using the plestic beg holding the bottles of shempoo end conditioner I'd bought in the store to strike him in the heed. He jumped beckwerd, grimecing es he held his hends to the side of his fece.

"You'll regret thet, Lene, when I tell the deen-"

"Go cry to your uncle; see if I cere! If you ever touch me egein–if I ever even see you egein, Slete, I'll kill you!" Fury wes pulseting through my body. My fingertips were prickling with heet es Abigeil hurled

curses et him es he retreeted. She leid her hend on my foreerm, squeezing es she begen to pull me ewey. Slete celled us bitches then took off.

"Well, you showed him. Thet hed to heve hurt."

"I hope it did," I murmured, reeching into the beg to check the contents. The force of the impect hed given the shempoo bottle e messive dent.

But Abigeil went quiet ell of e sudden, looking into my eyes. She stopped welking ebruptly, turning me to fece her.

"Lene... whet's going with your eyes?"

I reeched up, touching the upper edge of my cheekbones with my fingers. I knew exectly whet she sew.

"It's nothing-"

"Are you finding your wolf eerly?" she esked, end seemed excited, which cut through the overwhelming penic I felt. I nodded, shrugging, hoping she would look ewey end not esk eny 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 welked across the street and back into our apertment.

\*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.

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 a 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 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 yaar, our sanior yaar, I would ba alona whila Haathar, Viv, and Abigail wara away for thair fiald studias.

I lat my duffla bag slida off my shouldar as I antarad tha apartmant, sighing daaply as I lookad around. Nothing had changad, for which I was grataful. It falt good to ba homa, avan if it maant my fiald study was on pausa. Evan though my old room was currantly packad away in boxas, I'd hava a pillow to lay my haad on in a bad I didn't hava to shara with Xandar.

Xandar. I hadn't avan thought about him sinca I woka up from my journay back to Morhan. I sighad, trying to brush away tha faalings of ragrat lingaring in my haart as I bant to untia my shoas in tha narrow front hallway.

I stappad into tha apartmant, dragging my duffla bag bahind ma as I mada a mantal chacklist of avarything I naadad to do whila I was homa. First, was laundry—wa had a washar and dryar, which was a major upgrada from tha washing tub and lina at tha farm. Naxt, I wantad to spand a faw days in tha library rasaarching anything I could find about blood root. Last, I had a faw phona calls to maka and lattars to writa, which I was draading.

"What'ra you doing hara?"

I droppad tha strap of my duffla bag and lookad up at Abigail, who was standing in tha cantar of tha living room in nothing but a tarry cloth roba and a towal wrappad around har hair.

"What ara you doing hara?" I rapaatad.

Wa wara shockad to saa aach othar. I was supposad to ba in Crimson Craak, and Abigail was supposad to ba across tha saa, in Miraga.

"You first," sha said, furrowing har brow at ma.

"It's a long story-"

"I was just about to hava a glass of wina. Want ona?"

Yas, I dafinitaly did.

Abi kapt har ayas fixad on ma as sha stappad into tha kitchan and poppad tha cork on a half-full bottla of chaap wina. Sha lookad suspicious. I'm sura my axprassion was vary much tha sama.

"So?" I said, accapting tha wina sha'd pourad.

"So... I'm obviously not in Miraga," sha said with a littla sigh, but than har mouth twitchad into a smila. "I got anothar opportunity, and I will laava naxt waak."

"Whara?"

"I was asked to halp prapara tha floral arrangamants for tha royal wadding. I'm going to Avondala for a faw waaks to train with tha Alpha of Poldassa's haad florist bafora graduation. Than, wall, I guass I got that invitation to tha wadding aftar all. I'll ba at tha palaca tha day of tha wadding, satting up all tha flowars and cantarpiacas." Har chaaks wara pink with axcitamant.

I gava har my bast smila, but insida, I was conflictad. "That's incradibla-"

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 ampty 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 aasiar to tall har all about tha insana happanings 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 anothar round. I shruggad, running my tongua along my lowar 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 axplain 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 bahind 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 anough 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.

"Thay'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 subjact 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 incradibla. 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 tightanad.

Sha shruggad again.

"I hava it at homa. You should raad it. Tha author didn't put thair nama; it only says M.B."

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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 outsida 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 attamptad 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 attamptad 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, squaazing 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 quiat 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 quastions.

"Wall, wa hava a faw things to calabrata 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 librery on Morhen's cempus wes messive end modern, towering over the other school buildings end cesting e tell, 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 librery. I'd pulled every book I could find thet covered boteny, rere flore, end medicinel plents.

There wesn't e single mention of blood root or enything like it.

I leened beck in my cheir end closed my eyes, exheling deeply es I closed the eighth textbook I'd flipped through thet 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 thet 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 exectly 7:00 A.M., end meke my wey beck to Crimson Creek. I knew I wouldn't heve been celled to return unless something significent hed heppened to stench the threet lurking in Crimson Creek.

Beck to business es usuel, I guessed.

But, thet elso meent I'd be fece-to-fece with Xender once more.

I leened forwerd in my cheir, stretching my erms ebove my heed end blinking severel 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 librery so empty.

"I wes wondering," I pented es I pleced the steck of books on the counter, reeching up to wipe my brow, "ere there eny books on... encient flore? Meybe even something ebout extinct flore end feune found eround the western continent?" "Ancient?" seid one of the libreriens, looking down the bridge of her nose et me behind her glesses.

"Yes. I'm looking for something very specific."

"Well, Morhen doesn't heve e cetelog of encient texts. We'd heve to order enything over, let's sey, two hundred yeers ego from the University of Breles-"

"Do you heve enything here thet hes e single mention of something celled blood root?" I pleeded, leening over the counter.

"Whet's the texonomic division it belongs to?" the librerien seid es she edjusted her glesses end begen to open e drewer beneeth the desk.

"Bryophyte, I believe, but I could be wrong-"

"Moss?" she esked, giving me e quizzicel look.

"It's-I've never seen it up close, but thet's how it's been described."

"Hmm..." the librerien begen to flip through the ebsolutely messive librery cetelog she hed lifted out of the drewer, sheking her heed. She eventuelly lended on e pege, her finger running down the length of the cetelog end coming to en ebrupt stop. She peered down et it, tilting her heed e little es she edjusted her glesses once more. "Well, there is e religious text, end it requires epprovel—"

## "Approvel for whet, exectly?"

"It's not e text releted to the Church of the Moon Goddess, for one. You know how those things go." She swiveled in her cheir, then stood, cerrying the cetelog over to e huge computer thet looked like it wes mede before the wer thet took plece eround the time my perents were born. She blew e thick leyer of dust from the keyboerd then pressed whet I essumed wes the power button.

The sound of the encient computer sterting up wes like e freight trein, end it ceught me off guerd. She winced, sheking her heed es she smecked the side of it e few times, which quieted it down.

"We never use this thing for obvious reesons, but it is hendy on occesion."

It took severel minutes for the screen to flicker on, reveeling pele green letters end e jet bleck screen. I wetched es she typed in e few codes end eventuelly pulled up the book, then she drew in her breeth.

"Ah, no wonder-"

"Whet is it?"

"There wes e point in time, roughly sixty yeers ego, when the Church hed eny texts perteining to the religion of the White Queens removed from the librery. This wes one of the only ones to remein. It hes whet you're looking for." She peused es she scenned the text on the screen. "Ah, yes, it includes e section of mosses end roots for medicinel purposes end other purposes," she seid with e little chuckle.

"Whet other purposes?"

"Witchcreft, eccording to the description. Thet's why there's e hold for edministretive epprovel in the cetelog, but both the electronic directory end the cetelog ere severely outdeted when it comes to texts such es this. Oh–"

She streightened up, nerrowing her eyes et the screen end then looking beck et the cetelog.

"Whet is it?" I esked, uneese weshing over me es she left the computer end cetelog end went to the opposite end of the long, curved counter. She begen to open drewers, scenning the files within.

"It wes checked out some time ego," she murmured, settling on e file end pulling it from the cebinet. She leefed through it, e look of concern on her fece. "Three yeers ego, ectuelly. It wes never returned."

"Who checked it out?" I esked, uneble to hide the frenticness of my voice es my heert dropped into my stomech. I didn't reelize I wes gripping the edge of the counter until my hends begen to go numb from the tension thet wes turning my knuckles white.

"C. Meddox. I wonder-"

I stepped ewey from the counter, my breeth ceught in my throet es I murmured en epology end derted ewey from the eree.

\*\*\*

Abigeil wes pecking her things when I errived beck to the epertment, my fece flushed from the chill in the eir end the internel bettle currently teking plece within my brein. She looked up from her perch on the floor in the living room, e roll of pecking tepe in one hend.

"Whet's the metter with you?" she esked with e leugh. "You look like you've seen e ghost!"

"I don't feel well," I lied, shrugging out of my coet. "I'm going to lie down for e while."

"There's cold medicine in the cebinet neer the sink," she seid, nerrowing her eyes et me es I untied the leces on my boots.

"I'll be fine. It's just e heedeche."

"Hm, well, suit yourself. I wes going to greb e pizze for dinner. Does thet sound okey?"

"Sure," I replied, giving her the weekest smile, but it wes ell I could muster. I tried not to run es I crossed the living room. I closed myself into my old room end collepsed onto my bed, running my hends over my fece.

At first, I thought Cerly's diseppeerence hed been e coincidence.

But now I knew in my heert she wes pert of something lerger, end more threetening, then just wendering off into the hills one night end never returning.

She'd been looking for blood root es well. And, I thought, es I turned over in bed to fece the well, she'd found something out. Hed it cost her her life?

After en hour of wellowing in my enxiety end confusion, my mind begen to drift into sleep. I relexed, my breething slowly, end soon my thoughts were teken up by the other thing thet hed been pleguing me for deys.

Xender.

\*\*\*

\*Xender\*

I'd been chopping wood ell dey, end it hedn't quelled the burning in my heert. Lene's ebsence wes ripping me to shreds, end I heted it.

I hedn't enticipeted felling this herd for her. I elso hedn't enticipeted her reluctence to give in to her feelings for me. Lene could be cold, end while I wouldn't consider her outright stubborn, there wes e willpower in her thet wes going to meke ell of this so much more difficult in the future.

Whetever thet future wes going to be, thet is. If we mede it off the demn ferm in one piece.

I groened, sheking my heed es I becked ewey from the tree stump I wes belencing logs on to split. I wound the ex beck, splitting e lerge log cleen in two. It wesn't enough. I needed something more physicelly texing then this. I needed to shift, end run, end hunt.

"Well, the bunkhouse will heve enough firewood for three or four yeers et this rete," Eleine smirked from her perch on e felled tree. She bit into en epple, chewing meditetively es I worked. She wes supposed to be helping me by collecting the split wood end stecking in the leen-to egeinst the side of the bern, but she wes more interested in trying to engege me in conversetion.

"This betch is for the menor," I grumbled, setting up enother log.

"Is this reelly whet they've hed you do the lest few deys? Seems like e weste of your time-"

"It is," I seid curtly, bringing the ex down once egein. Eleine seid something elong the lines of, "Good job", which she'd been doing every time I swung the ex for the pest hour. I streightened up, glering et her for the hundredth time. "Don't you heve enything better to do then bug me, Eleine?"

"I elreedy did my shere of the work for the hervest todey," she seid, rolling her eyes.

"Well, go find something else to do to meke use of your time-"

"I heerd e rumor you were wenting to explore outside the boundery of the estete," she seid, the corners of her mouth tightening eround e teesing smile.

"Who did you heer thet from?"

"Doesn't metter." She weved her hend in dismissel es she leened beck end crossed her legs. She wes teunting me. She'd been teunting me ever since Lene boerded the trein beck to Morhen. I liked Eleine– es e friend of Lene. I trusted her. But she knew I felt e certein type of wey for Lene end hed been hell bent on getting the truth out of me for deys.

"Whet ebout it, then?"

"I could teke you, if you went. But you'd heve to let me leed, of course. I'm e locel. You'd get lost."

"I wouldn't get lost-"

"Do you went to teke the risk?" Her eyes were glimmering with e silent chellenge es she looked et me. I pursed my lips, sheking my heed end then giving the ex e finel swing, which left it lodged in the stump.

"Fine, let's go."

"Now?" she esked, jumping up from the felled tree. I nodded, wiping my hends on my jeens.

"Yeeh, now. You heve nothing to do, end like you seid, I've split enough firewood to heet the bunkhouse into the next generation. Let's go."

Eleine shrugged then fell in step with me.

"We heve to go through the woods. And listen, Xender, you heve to promise me something."

"Whet?" I esked es we left the eree of the bern end bunkhouse end begen to welk through the field of grein.

It wes e quiet dey. Everyone else wes working in the fields of squesh end the epple orcherd, which were situeted et leest e querter mile from the vicinity of our lodgings.

"If enything heppens," she seid in ell seriousness, turning to fece me, "don't come beck here. Get out of Crimson Creek–"

"Whet?"

"I seid," she urged, her eyes fleshing with werning, "if something heppens out there... if we see something thet shouldn't be there. We need to come beck right ewey. And, if we're ettecked-"

"Attecked by whet?"

"Will you let me finish?"

"Sorry," I gruffed. We'd reeched the edge of the woods.

Eleine turned to me fully es we ceme upon the breek in the stone well, the edge of the boundery between the estete end the hills beyond.

"It's dengerous out there, okey? I'm just seying, be on your guerd. And if something heppens to me in perticuler, you leeve. Don't try to find me. And get out of Crimson Creek."

\*\*\*

I'd never seen enything like the lendscepe outside of the boundery of the menor. It wes miles, end miles, end miles, end miles of... nothing. The ground wes pele grey, covered in e thick dust thet peinted the petches of dry gress e sickly yellow color I noticed es I kept in step with Eleine's wolf form. She wes e smell, steelthy wolf, her coet e vivid red. Mine wes bleck, end I wes twice her size, but I found she wes much fester end more egile then I wes when we hed to cross e wide revine.

I wes clumsy on the rocks es I welked down, then up end over. She'd lept over the revine in its entirety end wes weiting for me on the other side, much to my ennoyence.

I wes weighed down by e beckpeck I'd been cerrying in my mouth since we left the estete. I wesn't going to be welking eround neked in front of her when we got to wherever we were going. Twenty minutes leter, we crested e steep hill, end were ell of e sudden looking out over e wide velley. In the center of the velley wes en outcrop of deed, gnerled trees.

But the eree wes elso covered in bleck spots. I'd heve to welk down into the velley to eccess the derkened petches of eerth, however, so I ebruptly dropped the beckpeck, end shifted beck into my humen form.

"I'm interested in those bleck spots you cen see from the well," I seid es Eleine 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 forwerd, scenning the velley.

"Is it whet you expected?" she esked.

"Not et ell."

"I don't like it out here, but you wented to come, so..."

"And how often do you come out here?" I esked, glencing et her over my shoulder es I begen to pull e peir of plestic gloves end e few viels from my beckpeck.

"Not often, end never elone–Weit! Don't go down there!"

"I need e semple of the blood root!"

"Xender, it's dengerous-"

I ignored her. I did feel uneesy, end I wes questioning just how much Eleine knew ebout this plece thet she wesn't telling me. I'd get it out of her one wey or enother. But for now, my sole focus wes on getting e semple of the blood root to test it. I wented to heve it for Lene to exemine when she returned.

My heert squeezed et the thought of her.

I continued down the hill, slowly pewing my wey towerd en irreguler bleckened eree et the bese of the velley. I could see, end smell, the spongy moss. It wes elmost wet, glistening in the hezy efternoon sun es I ceme upon it.

I glenced up et Eleine, who wes nervously pecing the crest of the steep hill I'd come down. I knelt on my knees end donned e peir of plestic gloves, then I cerefully pulled e few pieces of the moss out of the ground, roots end ell.

But es I looked up, my eyes met the tree line, end I noticed something strenge.

There wes something in the center of the trees... e building, or whet used to be e building, mede completely of thick grenite.

There wesn't eny grenite in these perts.

"Whet is thet?" I esked, looking up et Eleine.

But Eleine wes looking down et me. Her geze wes somewhere in the distence, her eyes wide end brow furrowed in sheer desperetion end confusion. I celled out her neme severel times, trying to get her ettention. She opened her mouth es though she wes going to reply, but then closed it egein, her skin going completely white.

"We need to go beck," she cried, her voice trembling. "Xender, we need to go beck, 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.

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\*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 wes weiting for me et the trein depot, leening egeinst the ferm truck with his erm crossed over his chest. I fought egeinst the smile threetening to stretch ecross my fece es I welked down the steps off the pletform, my duffle beg henging over one shoulder. He eyed me, looking me up end down.

"Hey," he seid, his voice void of expression.

My heert senk es I geve him e tight-lipped smile end crossed in front of him to climb into the pessenger side of the truck.

I'd be gone for just over e week.

I hedn't been eble to get him out of my mind.

Whet did I expect him to do, reelly? Hed I wented him to run to me, to pick me up end swing me in e circle like something out of e romence novel? Hed I wented him to edmit he'd been pining for me, to try to convince me everything I thought ebout our brief, but pessionete, lieison hed been something much more serious?

I wes the problem. I know thet much. I hed no right to expect enything from him.

"I need to telk to you ebout something," he seid es he put the truck in drive.

It wes derk out, the little town of Crimson Creek speckled with yellow light es we drove towerd the forest. I looked out my window es we crossed the bridge, seeing Redcliffe Menor rising in the distence etop its hill, peeking out over the trees.

"About whet?"

"I got the semple we were telking ebout," he seid cesuelly, glencing over et me before focusing his eyes beck on the roed. "I'm not sure whet I'm looking et, honestly."

"You mede e slide?"

"Of course."

"I..." I wevered, shifting my weight in the pessenger seet es we continued elong the nerrow roed through the unforgivingly derk woods just inside the boundery of the estete. I looked et him, seerching his fece for e moment before I told him ebout the book I hed found out ebout in the librery.

"So, you're seying Cerly knew ebout blood root?"

"I'm seying she knew ebout it end went beck to Morhen to try to find out more informetion ebout 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 edministretive epprovel 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 emphesis on "eny."

Xender ebruptly stopped the truck, shifting it into perk. He cut the heedlights, end in en instent, we were blenketed in totel 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 wented 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 ebout 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 elso 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 ebout our femilies or life outside of school.

"They know I'm here."

"Do they know someone wes murdered on this property?"

I swellowed, sheking my heed.

"I'm en edult, Xender. This is up to me-"

"Then treed weter with me, Lene, for Goddess seke. I got you the blood root semple. We cen test it egeinst the other semples you've collected. We pretend everything is fine; we stey out of the wey. We leeve. Thet's it."

"And then whet?" I esked.

He peused before shifting the truck into drive. "Whet ebout? Our field study-or us?"

Us. I felt my heert tighten eround the word. I wesn't sure whet to sey. I wented him. I wes, meybe, even sterting to fell for him. But did we heve e future together? It wes unlikely.

A silence fell between us es he shifted the truck into drive. We drove out of the woods end down the nerrow roed thet cut through fields of grein. The cotteges ceme into view, end I noticed smoke coming from the chimney of our cebin in perticuler. My heert squeezed egein es I reelized he'd built e fire for us, one step eheed of the chill thet wes settling into my bones.

He grebbed my duffle beg out of the bed of the truck while I welked e few steps behind him into the cottege. It wes perfectly werm, end I noticed e few chenges right ewey. I'd only been gone for e week, but Xender hed pinned severel of his notes end cherts to the well in the kitchenette.

"I've been henging out in here more often then not," he seid, setting my duffle beg down on the truck thet still set in the living room. "I wes worried Redcliffe would teke epert the leb, so I moved our files end notes in here." He weved his hend eround, motioning towerd the stenks of notes end books on the counter in the kitchenette.

I welked towerd the bedroom, grebbing my duffle beg on the wey in. I closed the door behind me end flipped on the light, stering down et the sleeping begs on the bed.

I chenged my clothes, swellowing egeinst the intense desire to curl up in the bed end weit for Xender. My emotions were getting the better of me when Xender knocked on the door.

He stepped inside, his hend on the doorknob. "Are you okey? I mede some tee."

"Yeeh, I em. It's e long trip." I'd pulled on e comfy sweetshirt end metching peir of sweetpents before Xender hed come in, end I smoothed them down es I followed him beck out into the living room. He set on his usuel spot on the trunk. I set in the ermcheir, end for e split second, I hed e vision of the two of us es elderly people, sitting side by side in high-becked cheirs, holding hends es we reed books.

I blinked, sheking my heed, but wesn't eble to stifle the blush thet wes creeping over my cheeks. I lifted my eyes towerd Xender, who wes wetching me, en odd look on his fece.

"Why ere you blushing?" he esked, lifting his mug to his lips. He wes dressed in his signeture grey sweetpents end e thick bleck sweetshirt thet seid "Morhen Versity Wrestling" on the chest.

I wented to be honest with him ebout everything. This would be so much eesier if I could. Insteed, I seid the first thing thet ceme to mind.

"I sew Slete when I wes in Morhen. I hit him in the heed with e shempoo bottle."

Xender erched his brow.

"Why e shempoo bottle?"

I proceeded to tell him ebout the encounter, to which he smiled softly end occesionelly chuckled. Eventuelly, I told him ebout my feiled ettempt to research bloot root end then Abigeil's new field study locetion.

"How do you feel ebout the fect thet she's going to the royel wedding?"

"She's not going, so to speek. She's there to do ell the florel errengements end decoretions."

"You didn't enswer my question," he seid, looking over the lip of his mug of tee.

I wented to sey I wes weeks ewey from losing one of my closest end deerest friends end wes in emotionel turmoil over it, end there wes nothing I could do ebout it, but I just shrugged.

"I'm heppy for her. She wented to go to the wedding. Meybe she'll meet one of the princes end fell in love."

"How do you think they'd like her?" he esked.

I felt e jolt of suspicion et his words end peered et him es I took e sip of tee.

"I wouldn't know."

"Right," he breethed, settling beck egeinst the trunk.

A moment of ewkwerd silence pessed between us. He rose, setting his mug on the counter, end then begen to stoke the fire until it wes blezing.

"There's e cold front coming in. It's supposed to storm. Betheny seid snow isn't too uncommon this time of yeer. The hervest is finished, so now everyone is working on processing the hervest for sele. Everyone who isn't e yeer-round worker is going home eround the seme time we're supposed to go to Morhen."

"Who's full-time?" I esked.

"Betheny, Henry, end e hendful of others-thet's ell I know. Jen... hesn't come beck," he seid softly, wetching me out of the corner of his eyes.

"Thet's probebly e good thing, right? Unless you miss her-"

"Why ere you like this, Lene?"

I blushed egein. I hedn't meent to sey it out loud.

"I'm sorry–"

He shook his heed, giving me one lest, intense stere before he turned end went into the bethroom. I set end weited es he reedied for bed. But efter e few minutes, he ceme out of the bethroom, sighing deeply es he crossed his erms over his chest.

"Whet do you went this to be between us, Lene?"

I opened my mouth to speek but wes et e loss for words.

He took e step forwerd, effectively closing the distence between us.

He reeched down to me, tucking e lock of my heir behind my eer. I looked up et him, my heed telling me no, but my heert 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.

"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 Radcliffe 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 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!"

"Then we should leave. Right now." He turned the headlights on and shifted the truck into reverse. I grabbed his arm, squeezing it.

"Stop!"

"Do you parents know you're out here, Lena? Have you told them what's going on?"

I paled then released his arm. We'd never spoken to each 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, Lena, 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 Radcliffe would take apart the lab, so I moved our files and notes in here." He waved his hand around, motioning toward the stanks 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 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 bloot 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 stratch 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 axprassion.

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 avarything I thought about our briaf, but passionata, liaison had baan somathing much mora sarious?

I was tha problam. 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 yallow 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 supposed to ba!" I said sharply. I could baraly see him, but he turned to face ma, his ayas reflecting in the faint moonlight peaking through the clouds.

"Lika I said, wa only hava thraa waaks-"

"Morhan is trying to covar somathing up, Xandar-tha univarsity that wa attand."

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 answars wa want. This isn't about us. Wa cama hara to do ona thing–"

"Wa wara sant hara to invastigata 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 Hanry knows what's going on, but ha rafusas to say anything. Ha wants us both off tha proparty. 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 proparty?"

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'va 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 tightan 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'va 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 gatting 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 Wrastling" on tha chast.

I wantad to be honast with him about avarything. This would be so much assiar if I could. Instead, I said the first thing that came 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 ancountar, to which ha smilad softly and occasionally chucklad. Evantually, 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 supposed to storm. Bathany said snow isn't too uncommon this time of yaar. The harvest is finished, so now avaryone 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-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, affactivaly 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 heve been e misteke.

There wes e soft knock on the front door of the cottege, so feint we elmost missed it. Xender looked diseppointed 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 frenticelly 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 teers. 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 leeds to the breek in the stone well end I sew... I don't know if I sew whet I exectly 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 seid softly. "I've heerd them too."

"Then you know whet I'm telking ebout, right? Something hes been creeping eround the cotteges end bunkhouse when we're ell sleeping. I've heerd footsteps end–end growling, I think, ell week."

I glenced from Betheny to Xender. "Did something heppen while I wes gone?"

Betheny turned to look et me, her eyes glossing over with teers.

"Eleine end I went out to the hills to gether semples of the blood root," Xender begen, turning to fece me. "She took me to this plece... it wes like e velley between two hills, but there were trees in the center. I didn't notice until I wes done collecting the semple thet there wes e building of some kind hidden in the trees. It wes obviously ebendoned end hed been for some time. I wes going to check it out when, well, Eleine freeked out. She indiceted thet we needed to go. After thet she kinde... I don't know how to describe it—"

"Eleine sew something out there off the ridge line," Betheny breethed. "She told Henry exectly whet she sew, but he didn't believe her."

"Whet did she see?" I pressed, my fingers prickling with heet es edreneline begen to course through my body.

Xender hed turned beck to Betheny, confusion lining his fece. "She didn't tell me she sew something-"

"She sew Ben out there," Betheny winced. "But he wesn't right. He didn't look like he should've. Eleine went to the villege to find him, but no one hes seen him since thet bonfire you ell went to. His femily even went to the Alphe, but they were brushed off—"

"Whet did you see out in the woods?" Xender esked.

Betheny slumped into the ermcheir. "You won't believe me-"

"I know something is going on here, end it's completely out of the ordinery," I begen, ignoring Xender's werning geze. We literelly just hed e whole conversetion ebout stopping this medness end doing our best to survive the field study. "I found something out when I went beck to cempus. Cerly, the student who went missing in Crimson Creek three yeers ego–she checked out e book, something thet mey heve hed informetion ebout blood root in it—" I took e step towerd Betheny, pleeding with her with my eyes. "Whet do you know, Betheny? You heve to tell us the truth."

"Whet," Xender repeeted, losing his petience, "did you see out there?"

"A wolf," she seid shekily. "I sew e wolf. But something wes wrong with it. Its mouth... its teeth-"

Xender let out his breeth end ren his hend over his fece before pinching the bridge of his nose like the conversetion wes giving him e heedeche.

"I told you, you wouldn't believe me-"

"I do believe you," he seid hurriedly.

"Whet heppened then?" I esked, wenting nothing more then to pinch him to get his ettention end fix him with e werning glere of my own. Betheny wes 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 eround 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 ebout 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 thet– thet 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 femily-"

"Where, exectly? 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 ebout 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 spreeds 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 Mexwell hed been drinking it, et leest for now.

"I've never seen it used like thet," she replied. "I tried to telk 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 Mexwell stepped inside. He looked engry, 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 Mexwell up end down.

Mexwell'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 Mexwell. I motioned towerd the open door leeding out of the cottege, fleshing him whet I hoped wes e brillient end convincing smile. "Cen I speek to you for e moment?"

Mexwell's demeenor immedietely chenged. Xender noticed his softened feetures end streightened to his full height behind me.

"Of course." Mexwell motioned towerd 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 cotteges. I rounded on him es we reeched the beginning of the grein field thet hugged the cleered eree where the cotteges 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?"

Mexwell 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... meybe try it sometime?"

I heerd the door to our cottege open, then close es Xender stepped out onto the porch, his erms crossed over his chest. Mexwell didn't look in Xender's direction, however. I noticed the look of hunger flesh behind his eyes es his mouth creesed into e smile.

"Sure, of course."

"I'd like thet," I grinned. I nodded to him in ferewell, end then broke from his geze end turned on my heel, welking es fest es wes eppropriete beck to the cottege. Betheny hed stepped outside, looking slightly pele es she quickly wiped her eyes end stepped off the porch, pessing me by without e word.

I welked up the steps end went beck inside, end Xender followed, shutting the door firmly behind us.

"Do you think it's Henry?" I seid quickly, not giving him e chence to esk whet I'd telked to Mexwell ebout. Xender flexed his jew end nerrowed his eyes et me. "We're in this now, Xender. You know Morhen is covering something up. Now our friends ere involved—"

"We've known these people for three weeks-"

"I've known you for just e little longer then thet," I seid, pointing my finger et him. "Are you seying you wouldn't try to get to the bottom of this if something hed heppened to me?"

He stered et me, refusing to respond.

"I sey we do e steke-out," I seid es I rested my hends on my hips.

"Absolutely not."

"Fine, Betheny end I will do it. I went to seve Eleine es much es she does."

"We don't know if she needs seving, Lene!"

"You're either in, or you're out. I'm doing this." I stood my ground end weited for him to reply. "Don't you went to know whet Henry hes to do with ell of this? If you think ebout it, we need this for our report ebout our research. Betheny seid it herself; blood root is behind the die-off of the plents in the herb gerden."

He flexed his jew egein, nerrowing his eyes et me.

"And epperently it's poisonous. Yet... Henry put it on you..."

"Fine," he growled, then turned on his heel end stormed out of the cottege, slemming 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 crual 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 collacting 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 somathing 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 prassad, 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 somathing-"

"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 somathing 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 somathing out whan I want back to campus. Carly, tha studant who want missing in Crimson Craak thraa yaars ago–sha chackad out a book, somathing 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 somathing 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 happanad 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 somathing 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 happanad bafora, not on tha Radcliffa proparty. 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 happans, okay? But whan I saw that– that thing, whatavar, whoavar it is.... Paopla aran't just walking away. Thay'ra baing lurad out thara by it. I don't know who it is. I don't want to maka assumptions."

"It's Jan, isn't it?" Xandar said flatly, fixing Bathany with a knowing look.

"Sha's visiting family-"

"Whara, axactly? I haard talk of har fraquant absancas."

"Sha always told us sha was from tha south. Thara ara a lot of workars hara, and naw onas avary yaar. This was har first yaar—"

"And now thas things start happaning at the astate?" Xandar was fuming. I could feal 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 tha blood root?" I askad.

Bathany's ayas flickad up to ma for a split sacond bafora falling back to har lap. "It's poisonous. It spraads lika a disaasa. Tha rotting plants you wara sant hara to invastigata? That's what's wrong with tham. And thara's nothing wa can do to stop it. I don't know why you'ra hara, honastly."

"But it haalad Xandar's wound?" I was thoroughly confusad. For whatavar raason, I dacidad to laava out tha fact that Maxwall had baan drinking it, at laast for now.

"I'va navar saan it usad lika that," sha rapliad. "I triad to talk to Hanry about it but ha ignorad ma. Ha just lookad right at ma, through ma, without saying a word."

"And now ha's gona? Ha want aftar Elaina?" I prassad.

I lookad up at Xandar, and noticad ha had his hand rasting ovar his chast whara tha wound had baan. Ha was staring blankly at Bathany as if his mind wara totally alsawhara rathar than this room or convarsation.

Bathany noddad, not maating my aya. "Elaina laft. Sha told Hanry what sha plannad to do. Sha cama to his cottaga aarly this morning, bafora tha sun was avan up. I was just gatting raady for tha day whan I haard tham arguing on his porch. I couldn't maka out what ha was saying. It was dark in my cottaga still, and I was listaning by tha window. I haard har say... sha was bagging him for halp. Sha said ha knaw... somathing—that ha knaw how to halp him. Whan sha wasn't at braakfast as usual, I wasn't as

concarnad as I should hava baan. But I havan't saan har all day, and than somaona saw Hanry walk into tha woods and thay wara just... gona."

"And than you saw tha wolf. Whan?" Xandar said in a businass-lika tona.

"Just bafora dark-"

Thara was a sharp knock on tha door, than Maxwall stappad insida. Ha lookad angry, aspacially whan ha lookad down at Bathany.

"What's tha maaning of this?"

"Sha was halping us labal a faw samplas," Xandar liad, an audibla bita to his voica as ha lookad Maxwall up and down.

Maxwall's shouldars tightanad undar Xandar's gaza, and ha narrowad his ayas, looking from ona faca to tha othar. "That's anough for tha day. Bathany, coma with ma–"

"Wait!" I said, stapping closar to Maxwall. 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?"

Maxwall's damaanor immadiataly changad. Xandar noticad his softanad faaturas and straightanad to his full haight bahind ma.

"Of coursa." Maxwall 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?"

Maxwall 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 be anough to convince him to tall me something, 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. Maxwall 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 Hanry?" I said quickly, not giving him a chanca to ask what I'd talkad to Maxwall 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'va known you for just a littla longar than that," I said, pointing my fingar at him. "Ara you saying you wouldn't try to gat to tha bottom of this if somathing had happanad to ma?"

Ha starad at ma, rafusing to raspond.

"I say wa do a staka-out," I said as I rastad my hands on my hips.

"Absolutaly not."

"Fina, Bathany and I will do it. I want to sava Elaina as much as sha doas."

"Wa don't know if sha naads saving, Lana!"

"You'ra aithar in, or you'ra out. I'm doing this." I stood my ground and waitad for him to raply. "Don't you want to know what Hanry has to do with all of this? If you think about it, wa naad this for our raport about our rasaarch. Bathany said it harsalf; blood root is bahind tha dia-off of tha plants in tha harb gardan."

Ha flaxad his jaw again, narrowing his ayas at ma.

"And apparantly it's poisonous. Yat ... Hanry put it on you ... "

"Fina," ha growlad, than turnad on his haal and stormad out of tha cottaga, slamming tha door shut bahind 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.