

Kings Breeder 521

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 521

Lena

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Lene

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I nodded, the corners of my mouth tightening as I tried to hide my smile. He looked over his shoulder at me, glancing in my direction.

"I understand—"

"We won't speak another word of it after tonight," he said with finality. He continued to stare at me until I nodded.

I rolled my eyes as he turned back around to complete his task.

It was almost ten o'clock. I leaned against one of the tractors as I looked over at the open garage door of the warehouse. The bunkhouse was in full view, only a single light on in the room that housed the female farm workers. A shadow passed the window, then the light turned off.

This was it. We were doing this.

I heard the crunch of footsteps outside the warehouse, followed by a sheepish-looking Betheny. She was dressed for the chill in the air, and she had her tool belt around her waist. She looked ready to face whatever was out there, but her eyes betrayed her composure. She exhaled deeply as she walked through the threshold.

"I changed my mind," she said sheepishly, swallowing hard.

"Too late for that," Xander breathed, turning around as he examined his blade.

I narrowed my eyes at him as he ran his finger over the edge of the knife, which was huge.

"Do you really think we're going to need that?" I asked, but he ignored me, tucking his knife into the holster that was hooked on his jeans.

"I don't want anyone getting hurt," Betheny pressed.

Xander gave her an incredulous look, then shook his head as he bent at the waist to tighten his boots.

"Meet us at the fire pit in an hour, Betheny," he grumbled.

He had the one-track mind at the moment. We'd spent the day bickering back and forth about how to handle the situation. We couldn't go out in broad daylight, that was for certain. Betheny had come back to our cottage shortly after leaving with Maxwell, telling us he'd threatened some type of punishment if he heard word that we'd gone after Elaine and Henry. He'd been irrationally angry, from what Betheny said.

"Maxwell isn't going to know, if that's what you're worried about," Xander said casually as he walked past Betheny and flipped the switch on the wall that caused the garage door to begin to close. "Lene, come on."

Xander ducked under the garage door and walked out of the sight. I let out my breath, glancing over at Betheny, whose cheeks were pink with frustration.

"I trust him—"

"He's going to get himself killed!" Betheny hissed as she took a few steps in my direction.

"Do you want to wait and see if they come back on their own, then?" I asked, trying to hide the bite in my voice. I was ready to get this over with as well. My field study had been totally mired by the beastly mystery that was plaguing the farm. Now that Xander was finally fired up about it, I finally felt like we were closing in on a resolution for the situation.

Betheny closed her eyes for a moment as she considered my question.

"We're not going to find them."

"Yes, we are. And if we don't, we'll find whatever it is that's out there. Trust me. Xander has a plan, and I trust him. Okay?"

Betheny blinked, then looked me up and down.

"What kind of plan?"

Xander was walking in and out of the bedroom of our cottage, gathering things and tucking them in a backpack sitting on the kitchenette counter. I'd never seen him act like this before. He was hyper focused, determined, and all around totally void of expression or emotion.

"Are you a warrior?" I asked.

Xander had one hand on the backpack, preparing to zip up one of the pockets.

"What?"

"Are you... a warrior, of some kind? You just have... a certain look in your eyes right now," I stammered, feeling suddenly ridiculous. I slouched into the armchair.

"No," he replied, zipping the backpack and turning to me. "I'm just taking this seriously."

"I understand—"

"Do you understand? Really, Lene. Do you have any idea what we're about to do?"

"No, actually, I don't." I felt the heat rising to my cheeks as I peered at him through my lashes. This was startling to become the repeat of our conversation from earlier in the day when I'd thrown the mug at his head after he told me I wasn't coming with him, and we'd fought about it. "You said it yourself we didn't know what we were walking into—"

"I don't want you to come," he said flatly. "It's a terrible idea—"

"Well, you need bait. That's where I come in." I crossed my legs, tapping my foot as Xender's face began to redden with frustration.

"That wasn't the plan," he growled.

"I'm the female of childbearing age," I breathed, twisting the lock of my hair around my finger, "and I'll be out, after dark, alone... while you and Betheny wait in the woods—"

"If it's Henry," he said with conviction, "then it won't matter. I'm going to flush him out by calling out your name like we're looking for you, but you'll be right next to me the entire time. I'll put you in a tree, if I have to—"

"A tree? Xender, be serious!"

"I am deathly serious, Lene. If you step out of line even once I'll drag you back here. Do you understand? This is an incredible risk, and I wouldn't be able to live with myself if—" He stopped talking abruptly and ran his hand over his face. I bit the inside of my cheek, my stomach doing a little, uncomfortable flip. "We're getting Elaine back. That's it. We're going to sit in the woods and wait for this thing and follow it. Betheny says they've seen wolf tracks near the bridge leading into town. We'll start there."

"Okay," I said, and it was all I had the wherewithal to muster.

Xender watched me, his eyes searching my own as his shoulders fell. "I'm going to keep you safe," he said softly. "I promise you."

"I don't need you to do that. I can look out for myself."

"Just—" he held his hand out, motioning for me to stop, but then curled it into a fist. "Just let me... just let me do this, Lene. My way. Alright?"

"Alright," I breathed as I brought my knees into my chest. I hugged my arms around my knees, balancing my chin on top of one knee as I watched the flurry of emotions cross over his face.

Xender and I had spent the day in close quarters. We'd been arguing, but there was an underlying feeling of electricity between us that was still coursing through the room as we waited for the clock on the wall to strike midnight.

For a moment, I felt like this situation was putting the distance between us. We could focus on something other than the fact that it was obvious we both had feelings for each other. I hadn't meant to ask him if he was a warrior. I shouldn't have even cared. But... I did. I wanted to know. I wanted to know about him, about his past. I wanted to know what he wanted in the future....

"We should go," I said abruptly, practically jumping to my feet.

Xender followed me with his gaze as I hurried around the room and pulled the sweatshirt and jacket on, and laced up my boots.

"Lene, wait—"

"We're supposed to meet Betheny in ten minutes—"

He reached out as I tried to walk by, his hand laying over my forearm. I looked up at him, my stomach tying in a knot as I met his eye.

He looked as though he was about to say something. His mouth opened, but then he shut it again, clearing his throat as he let go of my arm and stepped away from me to grab his backpack.

"You're right. Come on."

He left the cottage before me. I closed the door behind me, watching as he adjusted his backpack on his shoulder as he walked out into the night. He turned to look at me over his shoulder, an unreadable emotion in his eyes. I chalked it up to nerves. I was nervous, too. We had no idea what we were dealing with.

But the knot in my stomach refused to let up as I took a deep breath, unable to tear myself away from his gaze. We'd be tip-toeing around what we both wanted to actually confront all day long, and neither of us—at least, I wasn't brave enough to bring it up.

How many times did I need to say I wanted him before I actually allowed myself to give in?

But he also hadn't said anything about it, not about what was happening between us now or what he wanted this to be in the future. We had two more weeks of the field study, that was it. We'd go back to Morhen and go our separate ways, most likely. I was graduating the semester early, in just a few weeks. I didn't know what Xender's plans were.

We'd never even talked about it.

We were just chasing monsters, and trying to solve the mystery that had nothing to do with us.

I realized, quite suddenly, why.

I almost called out to him, to tell him to wait, just like he'd done so earlier. But I bit my lip, belling my hands into fists at my sides as I stepped off the porch and into the darkness that blanketed the entire area.

It was the sterile, overcast night. It smelled like rain. We'd have plenty of distractions to keep our minds, and our hearts, busy instead of spending another night only inches from each other, neither of us able to sleep with the friction of the distance keeping us apart.

Was this love? I thought, swallowing against the pain of it. Was he... my mate?

I shouldn't be able to feel this strongly for him. It was impossible, from what I understood. A mate wasn't in the cards for me. A normal life wasn't attainable.

“Are you ready?” he asked, looking down at me as I reached his side.

I gave him a tight nod, not looking up at him. He sighed deeply, shaking his head as he motioned for me to start walking forward through the trail in the grain, toward the fire pit where we were meeting up with Bethany.

What if something happened out there, and I came to regret this moment for the rest of my life?

“Xander,” I said without thinking, my feet coming to a stop. He looked down at me, no doubt expecting me to say I changed my mind, and I wanted to go back.

“Yeah?”

“Do you... do you feel—”

“There you are,” Bethany said breathlessly as she appeared in front of us. She looked pale, her eyes shining in the moonlight. “I saw it. I know—I know where it went.”

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Lana

"Wa'ra going to find this thing," Xandar said as ha stood with his back to ma in tha warahousa. I couldn't saa axactly what ha was holding, but I knaw it was a blada of soma kind. Ha was sharpaning it, his words brokan up by tha sound of matal gliding ovar matal. "And than wa'ra dona with it, do you undarstand?"

I noddad, tha cornars of my mouth tightaning as I triad to hida my smila. Ha lookad ovar his shouldar at ma, glaring in my diraction.

"I undarstand—"

"Wa won't spaak another word of it aftar tonight," ha said with finality. Ha continuad to stara at ma until I noddad.

I rollad my ayas as ha turnad back around to complata his task.

It was almost tan o'clock. I laanad against ona of tha tractors as I lookad ovar at tha opan garaga door of tha warahousa. Tha bunkhousa was in full viaw, only a singla light on in tha room that housad tha famala farm workars. A shadow passad tha window, than tha light turnad off.

This was it. Wa wara doing this.

I haard tha crunch of footsteps outsid a tha warahousa, followad by a shaapish looking Bathany. Sha was drassad for tha chill in tha air, and sha had har tool balt around har waist. Sha lookad raady to fac a whatavar was out thara, but har ayas batrayad har composar. Sha axhalad daaply as sha walkad through tha thrashold.

“I changad my mind,” sha said sharply, swallowing hard.

“Too lata for that,” Xandar braathad, turning around as ha axaminad his blada.

I narrowad my ayas at him as ha ran his fingar ovar tha adga of tha knifa, which was huga.

“Do you raally think wa’ra going to naad that?” I askad, but ha ignorad ma, tucking his knifa into tha holstar that was hookad on his jaans.

“I don’t want anyona gattin hurt,” Bathany prassad.

Xandar gava har an incredulous look, than shook his haad as ha bant at tha waist to tightan his boots.

“Maat us at tha fira pit in an hour, Bathany,” ha grumblad.

Ha had a ona-track mind at tha momant. Wa’d spanth tha day bickarin back and forth about how to handla tha situation. Wa couldn’t go out in broad daylight, that was for cartain. Bathany had coma back to our cottaga shortly aftar laavin with Maxwell, tallin us ha’d thraatanad soma typa of punishmant if ha haard word that’d wa’d gona aftar Elaina and Hanry. Ha’d baan irrationally angry, from what Bathany said.

“Maxwell isn’t going to know, if that’s what you’ra worriad about,” Xandar said casually as ha walkad past Bathany and flippad tha switch on tha wall that causad tha garaga door to bagin to closa. “Lana, coma on.”

Xandar duckad undar tha garaga door and walkad out of tha sight. I lat out my braath, glancin ovar at Bathany, whosa chaaks wara pink with frustration.

“I trust him—”

“Ha’s going to gat himsalf killad!” Bathany hissad as sha took a faw staps in my diraction.

“Do you want to wait and saa if thay coma back on thair own, than?” I askad, trying to hida tha bita in my voica. I was raady to gat this ovar with as wall. My fiald study had baan totally marrad by tha baastly mystary that was plaguin tha farm. Now that Xandar was finally firad up about it, I finally falt lika wa wara closing in on a rasolution for tha situation.

Bathany closad har ayas for a momant as sha considarad my quastion.

“Wa’ra not going to find tham.”

“Yas, wa ara. And if wa don’t, wa’ll find whatavar it is that’s out thara. Trust ma. Xandar has a plan, and I trust him. Okay?”

Bathany blinkad, than lookad ma up and down.

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“Do you understand? Really, Lana. Do you have any idea what we're about to do?”

“No, actually, I don't.” I felt the heat rising to my cheeks as I stared at him through my lashes. This was starting to become a repeat of our conversation from earlier in the day when I'd thrown a mug at his head after he told me I wasn't coming with him, and we'd fought about it. “You said it yourself we didn't know what we were walking into—”

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“I'm a female of childbearing age,” I breathed, twisting a lock of my hair around my finger, “and I'll be out, after dark, alone... while you and Bathany wait in the woods—”

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“A trap? Xandar, be serious!”

“I am damn serious, Lana. If you step out of line even once I'll drag you back here. Do you understand? This is an incredible risk, and I wouldn't be able to live with myself if—” He stopped talking abruptly and ran his hand over his face. I bit the inside of my cheek, my stomach doing a little, uncomfortable flip.

“We're getting Elaine back. That's it. We're going to sit in the woods and wait for this thing and follow it. Bathany says they've seen wolf tracks near the bridge leading into town. We'll start there.”

“Okay,” I said, and it was all I had the wherewithal to muster.

Xandar watchad ma, his ayas saarching my own as his shouldars fall. "I'm going to kaap you safa," ha said softly. "I promisa you."

"I don't naad you to do that. I can look out for myself."

"Just—" ha hald his hand out, motioning for ma to stop, but than curlad it into a fist. "Just lat ma... just lat ma do this, Lana. My way. Alright?"

"Alright," I braathad as I brought my knaas into my chast. I huggad my arms around my knaas, balancing my chin on top of ona knaa as I watchad a flurry of amotions cross ovar his faca.

Xandar and I had spant tha day in closa quartars. Wa'd baan arguing, but thara was an undarlying faaling of alactricity batwaan us that was still coursing through tha room as wa waitad for tha clock on tha wall to strika midnight.

For a momant, I falt lika this situation was putting a distanca batwaan us. Wa could focus on something othar than tha fact that it was obvius wa both had faalings for aach othar. I hadn't maant to ask him if ha was a warrior. I shouldn't hava avan carad. But... I did. I wantad to know. I wantad to know about him, about his past. I wantad to know what ha wantad in tha futura....

"Wa should go," I said abruptly, practically jumping to my faat.

Xandar followad ma with his gaza as I hurriad around tha room and pullad a swaatshirt and jacked on, and lacad up my boots.

"Lana, wait—"

"Wa'ra supposad to maat Bathany in tan minutos—"

Ha raachad out as I triad to walk by, his hand laying ovar my foraarm. I lookad up at him, my stomach tying in a knot as I mat his aya.

Ha lookad as though ha was about to say something. His mouth opanad, but than ha shut it again, claarng his throat as ha lat go of my arm and stappad away from ma to grab his backpack.

"You'ra right. Coma on."

Ha laft tha cottaga bafora ma. I closad tha door bahind ma, watching as ha adjustad his backpack on his shouldar as ha walkad out into tha night. Ha turnad to look at ma ovar his shouldar, an unraadabla amotion in his ayas. I chalkad it up to narvas. I was narvous, too. Wa had no idaa what wa wara daaling with.

But tha knot in my stomach rafusad to lat up as I took a daap braath, unabla to taar myself away from his gaza. Wa'd ba tip-toaing around what wa both wantad to actually confront all day long, and naithar of us—at laast, I wasn't brava enough to bring it up.

How many timas did I naad to say I wantad him bafora I actually allowad myself to giva in?

But ha also hadn't said anything about it, not about what was happaning batwaan us now or what ha wantad this to ba in tha futura. Wa had two mora waaks of tha fiald study, that was it. Wa'd go back to

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It was a starless, overcast night. It smelled like rain. We'd have plenty of distractions to keep our minds, and our hearts, busy instead of spending another night only inches from each other, neither of us able to sleep with the fraction of a distance keeping us apart.

Was this love? I thought, swallowing against the pain of it. Was he... my mate?

I shouldn't be able to feel this strongly for him. It was impossible, from what I understood. A mate wasn't in the cards for me. A normal life wasn't attainable.

"Are you ready?" he asked, looking down at me as I reached his side.

I gave him a tight nod, not looking up at him. He sighed deeply, shaking his head as he motioned for me to start walking forward through the trail in the grain, toward the fire pit where we were meeting up with Bethany.

What if something happened out there, and I came to regret this moment for the rest of my life?

"Xandar," I said without thinking, my feet coming to a stop. He looked down at me, no doubt expecting me to say I changed my mind, and I wanted to go back.

"Yeah?"

"Do you... do you feel—"

"There you are," Bethany said breathlessly as she appeared in front of us. She looked pale, her eyes shining in the moonlight. "I saw it. I know—I know where it went."

Lena

"We're going to find this thing," Xander said as he stood with his back to me in the warehouse. I couldn't see exactly what he was holding, but I knew it was a blade of some kind. He was sharpening it, his words broken up by the sound of metal gliding over metal. "And then we're done with it, do you understand?"

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 522

Xander

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already, and soon we met the stone wall that cut through the forest, showing the boundary between the estate and the forest, and rolling hills, beyond.

Xender

A fine mist rolled around our ankles as we followed Betheny through the woods. She'd been rambling, trying in vain to make sense of what she'd seen. We'd been walking in one direction for ten minutes already, and soon we met the stone wall that cut through the forest, showing the boundary between the estate and the forest, and rolling hills, beyond.

I hated this place. I constantly felt like I was being watched. I was walking behind Lene and Betheny, my eyes scanning the darkness for any sign of movement, or any flesh of eyes... but there was nothing.

I also had a sneaking suspicion about Betheny.

I hadn't told Lene what I thought about the situation. She was right about Morhen being involved in some way, that was obvious. Why they would send students back to this place was the real mystery.

Unless, that is, were we some kind of sacrifice to whatever—whoever—was roaming these hills.

"It came this way, I'm sure. There's a break in the wall, just there," Betheny said hurriedly.

Lene looked back at me, a glimmer of apprehension in her eyes. I knew Betheny had something to do with all of this, despite her meek and terrified behavior. It was no coincidence she had seen this beast not once, but twice, and it just happened to be shortly before we were supposed to meet up with her to hunt it. I didn't think she was the creature, no. But I knew she was attempting to lead us into a trap.

I also knew she was an unwilling cog in the wheel. She didn't want to do this. I didn't want to have to kill her, but I would, if it meant saving my life, and Lene's.

I had it all planned out. Betheny would lead us to the creature, who was no doubt waiting for us somewhere in the shadows. I'd kill it, then Betheny if I had to. We wouldn't return to the farm. I'd already packed our things, and hidden what files and samples of the blood root I'd taken away where no one could find them other than myself. Lene had been so caught up in the fact that we were going to chase this thing that she didn't notice that her duffle bag was now stuffed with all of her belongings.

I'd take Lene to the Alpha of Breles, not the Alpha of Crimson Creek, who was most likely involved in all of this in some way. Then, well, if the Alpha of Breles refused to act, I'd be forced to subject Lene to the truth she was hiding from—the truth I'd known from the very, very beginning.

"We need to cross the wall," Betheny stammered.

"No, we don't. You said it came this way, and we'll wait here for it. It'll come back. It hunts at night, right?" I replied, giving Betheny a sharp look.

She looked scared out of her mind, but she nodded nonetheless. Lene shifted her weight in front of me, giving me a cold look for my sharp tone toward Betheny.

"We'll hide in this thicket near the wall. We won't be seen. We wait until sunrise. If we don't see it again, we'll try again tomorrow night," I lied. I meant to incapacitate Betheny before the sun began to come up and drag Lene to the train station by force.

But there was a crunching sound in the woods to our left, then something running through the trees. I narrowed my eyes, catching a glimpse of two yellow eyes in the darkness.

It was only a rabbit.

Betheny, however, looked as though she was about to faint. Lene put her hands on Betheny's shoulders and guided her into the thicket, murmuring reassurances. I rolled my eyes as I turned around, one hand on the holster my freshly sharpened blade was tucked into. Lene was letting me lead, at least.

Several hours passed. Lene fell asleep, which I was thankful for, her head lolling as she fought the fatigue that was setting into her bones. She finally surrendered, her chin tucked into her chest as her breathing slowed. I glanced over at Betheny, who was sitting wide-eyed, her back against the wall.

"Come over here," I hissed. She turned her head to me, eyeing me with fear lingering behind her gaze. "I said—"

She got up, crawling on her hands and knees past Lene as she made her way toward me. I motioned for her to sit on the other side of me, so I was still close enough to Lene I could reach out and grab her in an instant if I needed to.

"I know what you're thinking," Betheny whispered, her voice barely audible. "I'm not involved in this, Xender."

"But you know exactly what's happened at the farm, don't you? You've known this whole time—"

"I went this far to end," she whimpered.

"You need to tell me the truth. All of it. Don't think I won't use this knife on you as well."

Betheny paled. She exhaled, then swallowed hard, gathering her thoughts. "Mexwell isn't who he says he is. You've never been to the manor, but I have. Multiple times. He... he trusts me. He trusts me because it's obvious I'm scared of him, Xender. His house is... the people that live there; his servants and maids... they're old, but still young. No one has ever lived in that house but Mexwell."

"Then he'd be over three hundred years old, if I'm correct about the history of the region—"

"Two hundred years old," she corrected. "He's two hundred years old."

"That's impossible—"

"I know. That's what I thought too. But he drinks it... the blood root. He has to."

"I need you to back up and tell me exactly how you ended up here," I bit out, although I did want to hear what she had to say about Mexwell. I didn't like the way he'd been looking at Lene, or how he had invited her up to the manor. There was a hunger in his eyes that I recognized as desire. He wanted her.

"I don't remember—"

"What do you mean you don't remember?"

Betheny clutched her knees to her chest, her fingers digging into her jeans until her knuckles turned white. "None of this is real, Xender. Can't you see?"

“No—”

“I don’t know how I got here. I’ve been stuck here, in an endless f*cking loop. This town... nothing ever changes. There are no children, right? Not that I’ve ever seen. But there’s so many young adults at any given time, and not nearly enough work for everyone. I can’t remember my life before three years ago. I just... I look back, and my furthest memory is working in the herb garden, with Henry. He told me not to ask questions. He’d told me it’d be okay—”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Crimson Creek doesn’t exist,” she whispered, closing her eyes.

I stared at her for a moment, watching the pained expression dance across her face.

“That’s nonsense. Lene and I both arrived here, by the train. Lene went back to Morhen, and returned—”

“The train... that’s how—”

I smelled it before I saw it. It was rancid, putrid like dying, rotting flesh. I grimaced, my eyes watering as I blinked through the moisture and peered through the thicket at the woods, seeing and hearing nothing but the soft breathing of Lene and Betheny. Betheny had gone rigid, her eyes wide as she looked around without turning her head.

“Whose side are you on?” I whispered.

“Yours—” Betheny quickly replied.

“You don’t know who Lene is, do you?”

“I do know,” she said, her voice choked with a nearly inaudible sob. “That’s why she’s here. You have to understand, Xander. I’m not—I’m not drawing you into the trap. If she wasn’t with us tonight she’d be gone by morning—”

“How do you know?”

Betheny turned to look at me, her eyes glistening with tears. She didn’t have a chance to respond, however. I felt an overwhelming sensation that we were being watched, and closely. I tore my eyes away from her and stared out into the night, my hand going to the knife hanging from my waist.

“What is this thing, Betheny?” I asked, not bothering to keep my voice low.

“It used to be like us,” she cried, reaching over to grab Lene’s arm.

Lene’s eyes fluttered, then opened wide, staring at Betheny and I with a shocked expression. “You let me fall asleep?” she snapped, but then she noticed our expressions, and her eyes narrowed into suspicious slits. “It’s here—”

“Keep your voice down,” I hissed.

I got onto my knees and unsheathed my knife. I wanted to shift, but I couldn’t leave Lene behind. She was too young to know her wolf. I was, unless Betheny proved to me that she was trustworthy, Lene’s only defense.

“How do we kill this thing?” I asked Betheny.

“We can’t kill it, Xander. We need to study it!” Lene whispered urgently, grabbing onto my shirt as I began to rise to my feet.

I pushed her away. “Enough, Lene, we’re way past needing any of this for research. We’re ending this, now. And then we’re going home.”

“Home?” Lene replied, a little breathless. She looked... disappointed.

“Back to campus,” I ground out, flexing my jaw.

“It’s here,” Betheny whispered, pointing a shaky finger through the thicket.

I looked in the direction she was pointing, but saw nothing but darkness and the thin fog rolling over the forest floor.

“Where?” Lene whispered hoarsely.

I looked around, rising to my full height. I didn’t care I was in full view of the beast, if Betheny was right about it being nearby. I wanted it to see me. I wanted it to see the gleam of violence in my eye, and the edge of the blade glimmering in the faded moonlight.

“I can smell you!” I called out into the darkness.

A branch in the distance snapped, sending a ripple of noise through the woods as smaller creatures scurried out of the way of something large stalking toward us.

“Xander!” Lene cried as she struggled to her feet.

I pushed her back down, then gripped Betheny by the collar of her shirt, pulling her up so she was standing next to me.

Then, I pushed her out of the thicket.

“Xander?” she cried, looking back at me with pure terror in her eyes.

My chest squeezed as I realized I may have made a grave miscalculation about Betheny’s intentions. Tears began to roll down her cheeks as she slowly looked away from me, her eyes locking on something moving through the bushes on the other side of the clearing. I took a single step forward, and then I saw it.

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Several hours passed. Lena fell asleep, which I was thankful for, her head lolling as she fought the fatigue that was setting into her bones. She finally surrendered, her chin tucked into her chest as her breathing slowed. I glanced over at Bethany, who was sitting wide eyed, her back against the wall.

"Come over here," I hissed. She turned her head to me, eyeing me with fear lingering behind her gaze. "I said—"

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"But you know exactly what's happened at the farm, don't you? You've known this whole time—"

"I want this to end," she whimpered.

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"Then he'd be over three hundred years old, if I'm correct about the history of the region—"

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Xandar

A fina mist rollad around our anklas as wa followad Bathany through tha woods. Sha'd baan rambling, trying in vain to maka sansa of what sha'd saan. Wa'd baan walking in ona diraction for tan minutos already, and soon wa mat tha stona wall that cut through tha forast, showing tha boundary batwaan tha astata and tha forast, and rolling hills, bayond.

I hatad this placa. I constantly falt lika I was baing watchad. I was walking bahind Lana and Bathany, my ayas scanning tha darknass for any sign of movamant, or any flash of ayas... but thara was nothing.

I also had a snaaking suspicion about Bathany.

I hadn't told Lana what I thought about tha situation. Sha was right about Morhan baing involvad in soma way, that was obvious. Why thay would sand studants back to this placa was tha raal mystary.

Unlass, that is, wara wa soma kind of sacrifica to whatavar—whoavar—was roaming thasa hills.

"It cama this way, I'm sura. Thara's a braak in tha wall, just thara," Bathany said hurriady.

Lana lookad back at ma, a glimmar of apprahansion in har ayas. I knaw Bathany had something to do with all of this, daspita har maak and tarrifiad behavior. It was no coincidanca sha had saan this baast not onca, but twica, and it just happanad to ba shortly bafora wa wara supposad to maat up with har to hunt it. I didn't think sha was tha craatura, no. But I knaw sha was attempting to laad us into a trap.

I also knaw sha was an unwilling cog in tha whaal. Sha didn't want to do this. I didn't want to hava to kill har, but I would, if it maant saving my lifa, and Lana's.

I had it all plannad out. Bathany would laad us to tha craatura, who was no doubt waiting for us somawhara in tha shadows. I'd kill it, than Bathany if I had to. Wa wouldn't raturt to tha farm. I'd already packad our things, and hiddan what filas and samplas of tha blood root I'd takan away whara no ona could find tham othar than mysalf. Lana had baan so caught up in tha fact that wa wara going to chasa this thing that sha didn't notica that har duffla bag was now stuffad with all of har balongings.

I'd taka Lana to tha Alpha of Bralas, not tha Alpha of Crimson Craak, who was most likaly involvad in all of this in soma way. Than, wall, if tha Alpha of Bralas rafusad to act, I'd ba forcad to subject Lana to tha truth sha was hiding from—a truth I'd known from tha vary, vary baginning.

"Wa naad to cross tha wall," Bathany stammarad.

"No, wa don't. You said it cama this way, and wa'll wait hara for it. It'll coma back. It hunts at night, right?" I rapliad, giving Bathany a sharp look.

Sha lookad scarad out of har mind, but sha noddad nonathalass. Lana shiftad har waight in front of ma, giving ma a cold look for my sharp tona toward Bathany.

"Wa'll hida in this thickat naar tha wall. Wa won't ba saan. Wa wait until sunrisa. If wa don't saa it again, wa'll try again tomorrow night," I liad. I maant to incapacitata Bathany bafora tha sun bagan to coma up and drag Lana to tha train station by forca.

But thara was a crunching sound in tha woods to our laft, than something running through tha traas. I narrowad my ayas, catching a glimpsa of two yallow ayas in tha darknass.

It was only a rabbit.

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I got onto my knees and unshathed my knife. I wanted to shift, but I couldn't leave Lana behind. She was too young to know her wolf. I was, unless Bathany proved to me that she was trustworthy, Lana's only defense.

“How do wa kill this thing?” I askad Bathany.

“Wa can’t kill it, Xandar. Wa naad to study it!” Lana whisparad urgently, grabbing onto my shirt as I began to risa to my faat.

I pushad har away. “Enough, Lana, wa’ra way past naading any of this for rasaarch. Wa’ra anding this, now. And than wa’ra going homa.”

“Homa?” Lana rapliad, a littla braathlass. Sha lookad... disappointad.

“Back to campus,” I ground out, flaxing my jaw.

“It’s hara,” Bathany whisparad, pointing a shaky finger through tha thickat.

I lookad in tha diraction sha was pointing, but saw nothing but darknass and tha thin fog rolling ovar tha forast floor.

“Whara?” Lana whisparad hoarsaly.

I lookad around, rising to my full haight. I didn’t cara I was in full viaw of tha baast, if Bathany was right about it baing naarby. I wantad it to saa ma. I wantad it to saa tha glaam of violanca in my aya, and tha adga of tha blada glimmaring in tha fadad moonlight.

“I can small you!” I callad out into tha darknass.

A branch in tha distanca snappad, sanding a rippla of noisa through tha woods as smaller craaturas scurriad out of tha way of somathing larga stalking toward us.

“Xandar!” Lana criad as sha strugglad to har faat.

I pushad har back down, than grippad Bathany by tha collar of har shirt, pulling har up so sha was standing naxt to ma.

Than, I pushad har out of tha thickat.

“Xandar?” sha criad, looking back at ma with pura tarror in har ayas.

My chast squaazad as I raalizad I may hava mada a grava miscalculation about Bathany’s intantions. Taars began to roll down har chaaks as sha slowly lookad away from ma, har ayas locking on somathing moving through tha bushas on tha othar sida of tha claaring. I took a singla stap forward, and than I saw it.

A wolf, but it wasn’t—I couldn’t explain it.

I knaw immadiataly who it was.

“Bathany, shift! Now!”

Xander

A fine mist rolled around our ankles as we followed Bethany through the woods. She’d been rambling, trying in vain to make sense of what she’d seen. We’d been walking in one direction for ten minutes

already, and soon we met the stone wall that cut through the forest, showing the boundary between the estate and the forest, and rolling hills, beyond.

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 523

Lena

Xander was gone in an instant. I screamed his name, but it was useless. Bethany had just enough time to catch the holstered knife he'd thrown at her before he disappeared in a blur of ripped clothing and fur, his wolf bounding through the woods at an impossible speed.

Lene

Xender was gone in an instant. I screamed his name, but it was useless. Bethany had just enough time to catch the holstered knife he'd thrown at her before he disappeared in a blur of ripped clothing and fur, his wolf bounding through the woods at an impossible speed.

I cursed loudly, catching up to Bethany in two quick strides as she reached the edge of the mist-covered clearing, her eyes wide with shock and terror.

"I can't shift," I ground out, making eye contact with her.

She nodded, her dark curls trembling around her ears as she swallowed back whatever exclamation was at the tip of her tongue. She handed me the knife without looking at me, her eyes focusing on the direction in which Xander and the beast had gone.

I didn't know which direction we were facing. I could still see the boundary well behind us, but that was it. In front of us was a seemingly endless, dark forest.

"The farm is this way," she said shakily, pointing her finger through the trees. "We can go back—"

"We can't leave him out here!" I protested, gripping the hilt of the knife as I took it from its sheath, tossing the leather on the ground. "We're going after Xander."

I started walking to the edge of the clearing, glancing over my shoulder at Bethany. She gave me a quick, tight nod, then followed.

The woods were dense and completely dark. It was nearly impossible to see where we were going even with pale moonlight filtering through the canopy of trees. Leaves crunched beneath our feet as we followed the frantic trail of scuffed dirt and broken, low-lying branches that were left behind when Xander tore after the beast. My heart was in my throat as we walked, eventually meeting up with the boundary well again.

"The woods continue past the well for only a mile or so," Bethany whispered, pointing over the well.

Stones had recently been broken loose from the upper edge of the well, which was nearly as tall as me. I could see scratch marks on the stone. Either the beast or Xander had struggled to climb up and over the well during the chase.

I tossed the knife over the well, then pulled myself up and over with an effort that took my breath away. I wasn't the most athletic, but I'd managed just fine. Bethany was up and over the well in a split second,

the muscles of her arms straining as she gingerly climbed back down, entirely more graceful than the awkward fall I'd accomplished.

"I need to shift, Lene. I can't see their trail any longer. I can pick up their scent if I'm in my wolf form."

I swallowed back my anxiety about being left out in the woods, alone. Betheny was right. I could no longer see the trail.

"I can carry you on my back," she added as she began to take off her clothes. "I'm not a very big wolf though, so it won't be a smooth ride."

I had a sudden memory of my father taking me on long rides through the countryside in Velorie as a child, my fingers tangled in his chestnut-colored fur. I felt a rush of tears well in the corners of my eyes. I wondered, briefly, if I'd ever see him again, and how stupid I'd been over the last few years by putting distance between myself and my parents.

I blinked as the memory was flooded by our dark reality. Betheny was standing in front of me in her wolf form, her eyes glowing amber in the faded moonlight. I had no way of communicating with her now. I'd have to trust her.

I climbed on her back, holding onto her ruff with one hand while I gripped the knife with the other, and we were off.

She moved in a violent zigzag motion as we traveled through the forest for the last mile of dense trees and rotting, autumn foliage. I held on for dear life as she leaped over felled trees and tangles of thick brambles. She knew where she was going after a few minutes, I could tell. She no longer lifted her long snout to sniff the air. We were on their trail, and I knew it was just a matter of time before we caught up to Xander and his prey.

The sky opened up to us as we reached the edge of the forest. The hills rolled on and on in front of us, pockets of moonlight flooding shallow valleys as Betheny began to sprint into the mysterious new landscape.

I felt oddly claustrophobic, almost like the sky was falling down on me and tightening itself around me in a terrifying embrace. The stars were sharp and clear out here, and several burned an eerie red color above us as we finally closed in on Xander.

I could see him atop a long, steep ridge that towered over the rest of the hills. There were no trees in sight, not a single plant or bush as far as the eye could see. Xander lunged over the other side of the ridge and disappeared, and the space around us suddenly erupted into echoes of whatever battle was taking place just out of sight.

I screamed, unable to help it. Betheny too was whimpering and panting as she ran as fast as she could with me fixed firmly on her back. I knew my weight was slowing her down, but it would have taken me ages to run that far on my own.

I wasn't sure what I saw when we reached the top of the ridge. Xander was pinned to the ground by another wolf, but it didn't look like any wolf I'd ever seen. Xander's teeth were white and reflecting in

the moonlight as he snarled and snatched his jaws, latching himself on his opponent's leg, which caused the other wolf to screech and move off Xander as it tried to free itself from his jaw.

I didn't realize I'd let go of Betheny until I hit the ground. The impact knocked the breath from my lungs. I realized I'd dropped the knife as I clenched my hands into fists, trying in vain to catch my breath. My vision blurred, the stars above my head spinning in a circle as I reached up to feel along the back of my skull. Warmth, wetness. Blood.

Betheny was howling and snarling. Someone yelped, then screeched. I found my bearings just enough to roll to my side, looking down over the ridge at the battle taking place below... but then I started rolling, then tumbling.

Down the hill I went, head over heels, right into the fray.

Rocks cut across my skin and tore my clothes as I tried everything in my power to stop, but it was useless. My feet went right over my head one last time before I came to a stop only a few yards from where Xander and Betheny were battling for their lives against the beast.

I gasped, more from shock than lack of breath, as my eyes traveled over the unearthly creature from close up. Bile rose in my throat as its eyes fixed on mine.

It was nearly hairless, its skin mottled and grey, with patches of what looked like mucus covering most of its skin. Long lines of red and purple covered its body, the same way a reging blood infection would do to its victim. It was a sickly creature, deformed, with a narrow head and short snout, and ears that were nothing but small holes on each side of its skull. It looked prehistoric, like some long-forgotten creature from the stories my aunts and uncles used to tell us when we were kids, something that existed long before the Moon Goddess cursed our kind with the powers of the wolf.

This was no wolf, not at all.

I was at a loss for words as it looked into my eyes. It was fixated on me, totally unbothered by Xander's and Betheny's desperate attempts to subdue it. I felt numb all of the sudden. I felt my body moving against its will. I was crawling toward it, reaching out with one hand to try to touch it...

But then it left my gaze, and I snapped out of my stupor as Xander's jaw locked around my boot, flinging me backward out of harm's way.

Betheny screamed. I raised my head in horror as I saw her in her human form, the creature towering over her with its mouth open. Its teeth... they were wrong. They were all wrong. Its canine teeth were as long as my palm, shining in the moonlight and sharpened to an edge that seemed impossible as it dipped its head back down and clamped its mouth shut on Betheny's shoulder.

Xander tackled it and knocked it over, but it was still latched onto Betheny and she was sent flying. I jumped to my feet, watching in horror as she landed several yards away, her body limp and arms outstretched.

Oh, Goddess. She had to be dead. There was no way someone could have survived that kind of trauma. I was running toward her before my mind caught up with my body. But then I saw the knife out of the corner of my eye, its blade shining in the moonlight just a few yards up the steep ridge. I changed course, running as fast as my feet could carry me until I reached the knife.

But in my heste, I'd grebbed it by the blede, end its sherpened edge sliced through my pelm. I hissed, clutching the bloodied knife by the hilt es I ren towerd Betheny.

Her chest wes moving. She wes geping, teking desperete, shellow breeths. I neerly tripped end teckled her es I tried to slow my steps, end ceught myself by gresping onto her shoulders, the wound on my hend gushing over her skin. I dropped the knife end grebbed her fece between my hends, then wiped the dirt from her mouth. I cursed under my breath es I mede e fist with my wounded hend end it held it up over her mouth.

But then I wes knocked sideways. I hed just enough time to greb the knife before the creeture pinned me to the ground. I screamed es it opened its mouth over my fece, its teeth only inches from my nose end its foul breath suffoceting me es I struggled to breathe. Its messive clews pressed into my belly, curling es they broke through my skin.

Xender's voice wes the lest thing I heerd before it ell went derk. I felt the knife hit something herd es my vision begen to blur. I twisted the knife es herd es I could, then let go, my body spireling into nothingness.

Lena

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"I can't shift," I ground out, making eye contact with her.

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"The farm is this way," she said shakily, pointing her finger through the trees. "We can go back—"

"We can't leave him out here!" I protested, gripping the hilt of the knife as I took it from its sheath, tossing the leather on the ground. "We're going after Xander."

I started walking to the edge of the clearing, glancing over my shoulder at Betheny. She gave me a quick, tight nod, then followed.

The woods wes dense and completely dark. It wes nearly impossible to see where we wes going even with pale moonlight filtering through the canopy of trees. Leaves crunched beneath our feet as we followed the frantic trail of scratched dirt and broken, low-lying branches that wes left behind when Xander tore after the beast. My heart wes in my throat as we walked, eventually meeting up with the boundary wall again.

"The woods continue past the wall for only a mile or so," Betheny whispered, pointing over the wall.

Stones had recently been broken loose from the upper edge of the wall, which was nearly as tall as me. I could see scratch marks on the stone. Either the beast or Xander had struggled to climb up and over the wall during the chase.

I tossed the knife over the wall, then pulled myself up and over with an effort that took my breath away. I wasn't the most athletic, but I'd managed just fine. Bethany was up and over the wall in a split second, the muscles of her arms straining as she gingerly climbed back down, entirely more graceful than the awkward fall I'd accomplished.

"I need to shift, Lena. I can't see their trail any longer. I can pick up their scent if I'm in my wolf form."

I swallowed back my anxiety about being left out in the woods, alone. Bethany was right. I could no longer see the trail.

"I can carry you on my back," she added as she began to take off her clothes. "I'm not a very big wolf though, so it won't be a smooth ride."

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The sky opened up to us as we reached the edge of the forest. The hills rolled on and on in front of us, pockets of moonlight flooding shallow valleys as Bethany began to sprint into the mysterious new landscape.

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But then it left my gaze, and I snapped out of my stupor as Xander's jaw locked around my boot, flinging me backward out of harm's way.

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Oh, Goddess. She had to be dead. There was no way someone could have survived that kind of trauma. I was running toward her before my mind caught up with my body. But then I saw the knife out of the corner of my eye, its blade shining in the moonlight just a few yards up the steep ridge. I changed course, running as fast as my feet could carry me until I reached the knife.

But in my haste, I'd grabbed it by the blade, and its sharpened edge sliced through my palm. I hissed, clutching the bloodied knife by the hilt as I ran toward Bethany.

Her chest was moving. She was gasping, taking desperate, shallow breaths. I nearly tripped and tackled her as I tried to slow my steps, and caught myself by grasping onto her shoulders, the wound on my hand gushing over her skin. I dropped the knife and grabbed her face between my hands, then wiped the dirt from her mouth. I cursed under my breath as I made a fist with my wounded hand and it held it up over her mouth.

But then I was knocked sideways. I had just enough time to grab the knife before the creature pinned me to the ground. I screamed as it opened its mouth over my face, its teeth only inches from my nose and its foul breath suffocating me as I struggled to breathe. Its massive claws pressed into my belly, curling as they broke through my skin.

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"I can't shift," I ground out, making aya contact with har.

Sha noddad, har dark curls trambling around har aars as sha swallowad back whatavar axclamation was at tha tip of har tongua. Sha handad ma tha knifa without looking at ma, har ayas focusing on tha diraction in which Xandar and tha baast had gona.

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Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 524

Xander

Jen was laying on top of Lena, her dark brown hair blanketing the both of them as I roughly pulled her off of Lena's body.

Xender

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I didn't pay her any mind. I was naked as the day I was born, covered in blood, and had nothing on my mind but the fact that Lene was struggling to breathe in front of me, her eyes open but totally unseeing. I knelt before her, falling to my knees and placing my hands over her abdomen where deep, gaping wounds stretched across her skin.

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I met her eyes, and a shared understanding passed between us. I could see the break in the well near the firepit from where we stood. We'd take Lene and Jen back to the farm and try to stay hidden. Lene needed medical attention, however, and badly.

I kept in step with Betheny while she dragged Jen along. It was roughly a mile walk to the well, and Jen fought Betheny the whole damn way. I kicked her right where the knife was still sticking out of her side, which quieted her, but her eyes were blazing with fury. She was in human form, but she was absolutely rebid, her eyes wide, and she was foaming at the mouth.

She looked possessed, maybe even suffering from some kind of disease. I didn't care at the moment. I'd kill her once we were able to get information out of her.

The mile felt endless, but eventually we reached the boundary well. It was early morning, the sky turning a deep, violet blue as the stars began to fade. Thankfully, the lights in the bunkhouse were still off. No one was up and moving about as we reached the warehouse. It was the only place I could think to keep them both until Betheny and I could come up with a plan.

I went inside and laid Lene down in the bed of Betheny's truck. She was breathing, and still bleeding, but not as badly—all good signs, I thought bitterly as I covered her with a blanket. I quickly dressed in the clothes I had tucked away near the lab, which were stained with grime from creating the slides for the microscope, but I didn't care. My skin was chilled and numb, and once the warmth began to set back in, all I felt was anger.

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Betheny nodded, swallowing hard as she pulled on a pair of coveralls and tossed my lab coat in a waste bin. It was unseemly. Betheny had been covered in all kinds of grime and blood, and the white lab coat was now speckled with colors I couldn't even describe.

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We left Jen on the ground and got Lene into the truck. I buckled her in, my chest tightening as her head slumped forward. She'd been unconscious for well over an hour now.

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I kissed her, not giving a f*ck that Betheny was watching. I heard the garage door opening as I reluctantly let Lene go and closed the door, slipping the hood of the truck as Betheny beckoned it out of the warehouse and sprayed gravel as she sped off toward the village.

I closed the garage door, my eyes on the windows of the bunkhouse, where a single light had just turned on.

I expected Jen to grow weak with the knife stuck in her side, but that didn't turn out to be the case. She fought against her restraints for the better part of an hour before she finally calmed down enough that I felt good about leaving her alone in the warehouse, hidden in the corner behind the seldom-used tractor.

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“You’ll need to drive,” she said as we loaded Jen into the bed of the truck and covered her with a tarp. “I told some of the workers I wasn’t feeling well and that you were running the rest of my errands for the day.”

A few minutes later we were driving toward Crimson Creek in complete silence. The only time Bethany spoke was when she told me to take the right instead of the left toward the village. We ended up deep in the hills and some far flung, run down farm.

The farmhouse was a sickly grey color, its paint faded and flaking and its roof patched in several places. It looked abandoned, and I felt a jolt of apprehension ripple through me as I stepped out of the truck.

“This is where you took her?” I asked, rounding on Bethany as she got out of the truck.

“Calm down, Xander. He’s doing us an incredible favor—”

“Who?” I asked, my voice as sharp as the blade still stuck in Jen’s ribs.

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I nearly snapped my neck as I turned around. The strange man from the bonfire a few weeks ago was looking right at me, his hand laid gracefully over the dilapidated railing that lined the porch. It was the man who had been staring at me, and at Lena, so intently it had made me uneasy.

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Xander

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 525

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She glanced at me only briefly before laying the spoon across the pot and quickly leaving the living room. I heard the front door open and shut as we began to walk up the flight of stairs.

"My sister, Alme," he said, motioning his hand dismissively. "She doesn't talk much."

I followed him through an incredibly narrow and ill-lit hallway until finally he stopped walking, and pulled out a heavy set of keys. Fury rippled through me as he unlocked the door.

"You locked her in?" I sneered, but Gideon only shrugged.

"I locked everyone else out," he said calmly, glancing at me before stepping out of the way to let me and Bethany cross into the bedroom.

It was e derk room, the only light coming from e single window with feded lece curteins. It was stuffy in the room, end cramped, with little room to welk eround with three grown edults now teking up most of the free spece.

Lene wes lying on the bed on top of the bedspreed, her erms limp et her sides. She hed been redressed in e peir of sweetpents that were too lerge for her frem, end the button-down shirt she wes weering wes open to expose her ebdomen. I sucked in my breeth es my geze treveled from her fece to her stomech, where four long, deep gesches stretched from beneeth her breests ell the way to her hip bones.

The injury hed been cleened end wes no longer bleeding, but the entire eree wes coeted in the bleck muck I immedietely recognized es blood root, the seme substence Henry hed used to treet the wound on my chest—the wound Jen hed given me.

“Who ere you?” I breethed, directing my inquiry et Gideon without looking over et him.

“Thet doesn’t metter right now. My brothers ere deeling with the hybrid, end Alme will see to Lene’s cere—”

“Hybrid?” I esked, end this time I did look et Gideon.

He wes not e very tell men, stending only e few inches teller then Betheny. His derk heir wes swept beck, his eyes e soft, pele green. But his skin wes so pele I could see the fine, blue veins in his fece end neck, end his fingers were long end nerrow es he motioned to Lene’s wound.

“She should heve been deed,” Gideon seid celmly, shrugging one shoulder. “All of you, ectually. No one hes survived these creetures—”

“There’s more then one?” I ground out, e dozen questions blurring my thoughts. “Whet the hell is e hybrid?”

“It’s the thing thet did this to you. A wolf, e shifter, but chenged. They’re ferel. Rebid... end when thet new pert of them tekes hold they become increesingly out of control. We’ll kill the creeture, I hope you know. Whoever it once wes, is elreedy long gone.”

“Whet is the new pert of it? Whet is it mixed with?” I esked, clenching my hends into fists. “Whet does it went, exectly?”

Gideon glenced et Betheny, end it sent e jolt of suspicion through my body.

“Whet,” I begen, looking et them both, “ere you not telling me?”

“Leter,” Gideon murmured, motioning to Betheny to follow him. “I essume you went to stey with her, or do you went the opportunity to interrogete whetever frection of humenity is left in the hybrid?”

I looked down et Lene, my heert squeezing painfully. I didn’t went to leeve her. I didn’t know if I could trust these people.

“She’s sefe,” Gideon essured, his voice suddenly rich with empethy.

I looked over at him, flexing my jaw as I sized him up one more time. "You're going to tell me everything," I stated with conviction, to which Gideon only nodded, a look of surrender flashing behind his eyes.

Gideon's brothers happened to be the same group of men he'd been standing with at the bonfire at the lake. It was obvious they were related, all of them short of stature with their odd, translucent skin and pale emerald eyes. We were standing in a barn, which was caved in on one side, the other side just tall enough for us to stand at a comfortable distance from each other, surrounding the "hybrid."

Jen was looking right at me, her eyes reddened and her pupils dilated so extremely I wondered if she could see us. Selive covered her chin and neck, and her long teeth were cutting painfully into her lower lip as she snarled and snipped at us.

They'd chained her to a fallen and rusted beam with her arms crossed behind her back. She wasn't going anywhere, that was for sure.

Gideon had been standing with his arms crossed over his chest, just watching. After several minutes of silence from the group, he nodded toward one of his brothers, who stepped forward and swiftly removed my knife from Jen's side. She howled, the sound so shrill it sent a ripple of gooseflesh across my skin and made my ears ring.

"Where are the others? Elaine, and Henry?" Gideon asked in a business-like fashion.

Jen laughed in a delirious manner, tilting her head back and looking at us down the bridge of her nose.

"Maxwell will come for me—"

"You'll be dead by then," Gideon replied flatly as he accepted the knife from his brother. He wiped it on his jeans, then handed it to me.

I gripped the knife by the hilt, turning it over and over in my hands as I looked down at Jen.

"What are you?" I asked.

She smiled. It was the ugliest, most terrifying smile I'd ever seen.

"Death," she said simply, her voice nothing short of a choked whisper as her lips curved at the corners.

"What happened... to Jen?" I asked, narrowing my eyes at her.

There was a flash of understanding behind her eyes, but then they darkened again, her pupils now two different sizes. She didn't answer, instead baring her teeth and screeching so loudly we all covered our ears.

"Kill it before it kills the rest of them here," exclaimed one of Gideon's brothers.

"How many more of them are there?" Betheny croaked, her face draining of color.

"Not many. Not any others this close to the settlement in this area—" Gideon began, but broke off, his eyes locking on mine.

My chest tightened. I knew exactly what he was about to say. I knew he knew the truth about me at that moment. How he knew—I would need to find that out, end fast.

“We need to bring her to the Alphe,” I said hurriedly, but Gideon shook his head slowly, his gaze leaving mine and settling on Jen.

“We can’t,” he said.

“Why the f*ck not?”

“I’ll explain when the time is right. When Lene is awake. Until then, we let this hybrid weaken. She’ll be easier to kill if she’s gone without sustenance for a few days. She’s the only one of her kind for miles, from what we know. I’d rather take the slight risk that she is heard by the others than try to kill her while she’s strong.” Gideon turned on his heel, leaning into one of his brothers to whisper into his ear, then he turned to look at me, motioning for me to follow.

“What sustenance?” I hissed as I caught up to him.

Betheny was following close behind, her footsteps crunching in the dead grass as we walked back to the farmhouse.

“Blood, of course.”

Betheny took the truck and returned to the estate. I stayed behind. I had absolutely no reason to go back to the estate, and I didn’t want to. I was sitting upstairs in the bedroom, my head resting against the wall as I leaned back in the rocking chair. I’d tried to close my eyes, but found myself staring out the window, watching the sky darken as the worst day of my life fed into dusk.

Lene hadn’t moved at all. She was breathing, but her breaths were shallow and pained. Her wounds were still open and exposed, and I found myself on the verge of breaking down every time I looked in her direction.

This was not how things were supposed to go. If I’d known... If I’d know this path would have put her in danger....

I closed my eyes, only to abruptly open them again when the door opened, and Alme stepped inside. She was carrying a tray and quickly handed me the huge pewter bowl of stew, which I accepted gratefully. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d eaten, but just as I picked up the spoon, her hand came toward me, and she opened her palm, the dusting of black powder falling into my soup.

I blanched, meeting her eyes. “Why?”

“You were bitten,” was all she said.

The blood root was pungent, and I knew it had given the stew a somewhat acrid taste as I lifted my spoon to my mouth and tested it. Betheny told me it was poisonous. Maybe it would put me out of my misery.

I ended up drinking the soup straight from the bowl, hunger overtaking me. I hadn't even looked at the scorch marks on my back and chest from our battle with Jen, but I could feel them as I finally rose from the chair and set my empty bowl on the dresser near the door.

Alme was cleaning Lene's wounds. She glanced at me as I gingerly began to remove my shirt, hoping to catch a glimpse of myself in the filthy, dust-covered mirror above the dresser.

"I need to treat them," Alme said as she reached into her apron and pulled out a jar of blood root powder. She pointed to the long, shallow scratches along my shoulder blades and back, which were already causing purple streaks to fan out over my skin.

"I was told blood root is poisonous," I said, wedding up my shirt and tossing it on the rocking chair.

A soft, knowing smile touched Alme's mouth. She wasn't a beautiful woman. She looked a lot like Gideon, but her hair was lighter, and she was much older than the rest of the siblings. There was a severe sadness behind her eyes, something that had been lingering there for a long time.

"It's poisonous to those who haven't been marked by a hybrid. That's what she did to you, the first time, right there—" Alme pointed to the scar on my chest, which had healed nicely but was still raw and pink.

"Mark me? Like—"

"Not like the mark done by your kind," she whispered as she sat on the edge of Lene's bed with the tray in her lap. She poured the powder into a pestle and added some kind of light, floral-smelling carrier oil to it as she began to make a paste with the mortar.

"My kind? Are you not a—"

"No, I am not." Alme didn't look up at me as she spoke.

"That's impossible—"

"Haven't you realized that everything is possible? Of all people... you should know."

I swallowed hard, adrenaline prickling my fingertips as I watched her reach for what looked like a paintbrush. She coated it in the blood root sludge and then painted it over Lene's abdomen.

"She won't fully heal from this," Alme whispered, her voice edged with regret.

"What? Why?"

"She's not your kind, either, Xender. Not totally. She's fragile now. She shouldn't have been. There should have been no reason she couldn't have fought that creature with nothing but a look in its direction. Tell me, what do you know of her?"

I didn't answer. My silence was enough for Alme, she was looking at me, searching my eyes for understanding. She must have found it, because her expression softened as she turned back to her work.

"She'll struggle to carry the pregnancy," she breathed as she laid the paintbrush on the tray and reached for a large piece of unblemished linen to cover the wound. She laid it over Lene's stomach, her hand

resting there for just a moment before she reached for the tray again. "Does that ruin your plans for her?"

I swallowed back the retort that was on the tip of my tongue.

"You tasked yourself with protecting her, but you didn't truly understand who, and what, she is. Did you?" Alme had risen with the pestle end reached out with her fingers coated in the salve, tilting her head toward my wounds. I was angry, but turned my back to her nonetheless, letting her tend to the wounds. "What will you do now? Does she still hold the same promise in which you sought?"

I closed my eyes against Alme's words. Normally, I would have lashed out, defended myself. But Alme wasn't wrong, not at all.

In the beginning I was after Lene for one thing, and one thing only.

But now everything had changed.

Xander

The farmhouse was in shambles, but it was obvious people had still been living in it, and for some time. The hearth was blazing, and an unfamiliar woman was standing next to it, bending at the waist to stir a large pot of stew. She didn't look up at us as we came into the room. Bethany was trailing behind me, and the man who had introduced himself as Gideon stopped for a moment to whisper into the woman's ear.

She glanced at me only briefly before laying the spoon across the pot and quickly leaving the living room. I heard the front door open and shut as we began to walk up a flight of stairs.

"My sister, Alma," he said, motioning his hand dismissively. "She doesn't talk much."

I followed him through an incredibly narrow and ill-lit hallway until finally he stopped walking, and pulled out a heavy set of keys. Fury rippled through me as he unlocked the door.

"You locked her in?" I sneered, but Gideon only shrugged.

"I locked everyone else out," he said calmly, glancing at me before stepping out of the way to let me and Bethany cross into the bedroom.

It was a dark room, the only light coming from a single window with faded lace curtains. It was stuffy in the room, and cramped, with little room to walk around with three grown adults now taking up most of the free space.

Lena was lying on the bed on top of the bedspread, her arms limp at her sides. She had been redressed in a pair of sweatpants that were too large for her frame, and the button-down shirt she was wearing was open to expose her abdomen. I sucked in my breath as my gaze traveled from her face to her stomach, where four long, deep gashes stretched from beneath her breasts all the way to her hip bones.

The injury had been cleaned and was no longer bleeding, but the entire area was coated in the black muck I immediately recognized as blood root, the same substance Henry had used to treat the wound on my chest—the wound Jen had given me.

“Who are you?” I breathed, directing my inquiry at Gideon without looking over at him.

“That doesn’t matter right now. My brothers are dealing with the hybrid, and Alma will see to Lena’s care—”

“Hybrid?” I asked, and this time I did look at Gideon.

He was not a very tall man, standing only a few inches taller than Bethany. His dark hair was swept back, his eyes a soft, pale green. But his skin was so pale I could see the fine, blue veins in his face and neck, and his fingers were long and narrow as he motioned to Lena’s wound.

“She should have been dead,” Gideon said calmly, shrugging one shoulder. “All of you, actually. No one has survived these creatures—”

“There’s more than one?” I ground out, a dozen questions blurring my thoughts. “What the hell is a hybrid?”

“It’s the thing that did this to you. A wolf, a shifter, but changed. They’re feral. Rabid... and when that new part of them takes hold they become increasingly out of control. We’ll kill the creature, I hope you know. Whoever it once was, is already long gone.”

“What is the new part of it? What is it mixed with?” I asked, clenching my hands into fists. “What does it want, exactly?”

Gideon glanced at Bethany, and it sent a jolt of suspicion through my body.

“What,” I began, looking at them both, “are you not telling me?”

“Later,” Gideon murmured, motioning to Bethany to follow him. “I assume you want to stay with her, or do you want the opportunity to interrogate whatever fraction of humanity is left in the hybrid?”

I looked down at Lena, my heart squeezing painfully. I didn’t want to leave her. I didn’t know if I could trust these people.

“She’s safe,” Gideon assured, his voice suddenly rich with empathy.

I looked over at him, flexing my jaw as I sized him up one more time. “You’re going to tell me everything,” I stated with conviction, to which Gideon only nodded, a look of surrender flashing behind his eyes.

Gideon’s brothers happened to be the same group of men he’d been standing with at the bonfire at the lake. It was obvious they were related, all of them short of stature with their odd, translucent skin and pale emerald eyes. We were standing in a barn, which was caved in on one side, the other side just tall enough for us to stand at a comfortable distance from each other, surrounding the “hybrid.”

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"Maxwell will come for me—"

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She smiled. It was the ugliest, most terrifying smile I'd ever seen.

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"How many more of them are there?" Bethany croaked, her face draining of color.

"Not many. Not any others this close to a settlement in this r—" Gideon began, but broke off, his eyes locking on mine.

My chest tightened. I knew exactly what he was about to say. I knew he knew the truth about me at that moment. How he knew—I would need to find that out, and fast.

"We need to bring her to the Alpha," I said hurriedly, but Gideon shook his head slowly, his gaze leaving mine and settling on Jen.

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"Why the f*ck not?"

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“What sustenance?” I hissed as I caught up to him.

Bethany was following close behind, her footsteps crunching in the dead grass as we walked back to the farmhouse.

“Blood, of course.”

Bethany took the truck and returned to the estate. I stayed behind. I had absolutely no reason to go back to the estate, and I didn't want to. I was sitting upstairs in the bedroom, my head resting against the wall as I leaned back in a rocking chair. I'd tried to close my eyes, but found myself staring out the window, watching the sky darken as the worst day of my life faded into dusk.

Lena hadn't moved at all. She was breathing, but her breaths were shallow and pained. Her wounds were still open and exposed, and I found myself on the verge of breaking down every time I looked in her direction.

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I blanched, meeting her eyes. “Why?”

“You were bitten,” was all she said.

The blood root was pungent, and I knew it had given the stew a somewhat acrid taste as I lifted my spoon to my mouth and tested it. Bethany told me it was poisonous. Maybe it would put me out of my misery.

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A soft, knowing smile touched Alma's mouth. She wasn't a beautiful woman. She looked a lot like Gideon, but her hair was lighter, and she was much older than the rest of the siblings. There was a severe sadness behind her eyes, something that had been lingering there for a long time.

"It's poisonous to those who haven't been marked by a hybrid. That's what she did to you, the first time, right there—" Alma pointed to the scar on my chest, which had healed nicely but was still raw and pink.

"Mark me? Like—"

"Not like the mark done by your kind," she whispered as she sat on the edge of Lena's bed with the tray in her lap. She poured the powder into a pestle and added some kind of light, floral smelling carrier oil to it as she began to make a paste with the mortar.

"My kind? Are you not a—"

"No, I am not." Alma didn't look up at me as she spoke.

"That's impossible—"

"Haven't you realized that everything is possible? Of all people... you should know."

I swallowed hard, adrenaline prickling my fingertips as I watched her reach for what looked like a paintbrush. She coated it in the blood root salve and then painted it over Lena's abdomen.

"She won't fully heal from this," Alma whispered, her voice edged with regret.

"What? Why?"

"She's not your kind, either, Xander. Not totally. She's fragile now. She shouldn't have been. There should have been no reason she couldn't have fought that creature with nothing but a look in it's direction. Tell me, what do you know of her?"

I didn't answer. My silence was enough for Alma, she was looking at me, searching my eyes for understanding. She must have found it, because her expression softened as she turned back to her work.

"She'll struggle to carry a pregnancy," she breathed as she laid the paintbrush on the tray and reached for a large piece of unblemished linen to cover the wound. She laid it over Lena's stomach, her hand resting there for just a moment before she reached for the tray again. "Does that ruin your plans for her?"

I swallowed back the retort that was on the tip of my tongue.

"You tasked yourself with protecting her, but you didn't truly understand who, and what, she is. Did you?" Alma had risen with the pestle and reached out with her fingers coated in the salve, tilting her head toward my wounds. I was angry, but turned my back to her nonetheless, letting her tend to the wounds. "What will you do now? Does she still hold the same promise in which you sought?"

I closed my eyes against Alma's words. Normally, I would have lashed out, defended myself. But Alma wasn't wrong, not at all.

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But now everything had changed.

Xander

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Xandar

Tha farmhousa was in shamblas, but it was obvious paopla had still baan living in it, and for soma tima. Tha haarth was blazing, and an unfamiliar woman was standing naxt to it, banding at tha waist to stir a larga pot of staw. Sha didn't look up at us as wa cama into tha room. Bathany was trailing bahind ma, and tha man who had introducad himself as Gidaon stoppad for a momant to whispas into tha woman's aar.

Sha glancad at ma only briaflly bafora laying tha spoon across tha pot and quickly laaving tha living room. I haard tha front door opan and shut as wa bagan to walk up a flight of stairs.

"My sistar, Alma," ha said, motioning his hand dismissivaly. "Sha doasn't talk much."

I followad him through an incradiably narrow and ill-lit hallway until finally ha stoppad walking, and pullad out a haavy sat of kays. Fury ripplad through ma as ha unlockad tha door.

"You lockad har in?" I snaarad, but Gidaon only shruggad.

"I lockad avaryona alsa out," ha said calmly, glancing at ma bafora stepping out of tha way to lat ma and Bathany cross into tha badroom.

It was a dark room, tha only light coming from a singla window with fadad laca curtains. It was stuffy in tha room, and crampad, with littla room to walk around with thraa grown adults now taking up most of tha fraa spaca.

Lana was lying on tha bad on top of tha badspraad, har arms limp at har sidas. Sha had baan radrassad in a pair of swaatpants that wara too larga for har frama, and tha button-down shirt sha was waaring was opan to axposa har abdoman. I suckad in my braath as my gaza travalad from har faca to har stomach, whara four long, daap gashas stretchad from banaath har braasts all tha way to har hip bonas.

Tha injury had baan claanad and was no longar blaading, but tha antira araa was coatad in tha black muck I immadiataly racognizad as blood root, tha sama substanca Henry had usad to traat tha wound on my chast—tha wound Jan had givan ma.

"Who ara you?" I braathad, diracting my inquiry at Gidaon without looking ovar at him.

"That doasn't mattar right now. My brothars ara daaling with tha hybrid, and Alma will saa to Lana's cara—"

"Hybrid?" I askad, and this tima I did look at Gidaon.

Ha was not a vary tall man, standing only a faw inchas tallar than Bathany. His dark hair was swapt back, his ayas a soft, pala graan. But his skin was so pala I could saa tha fina, blua vains in his faca and nack, and his fingars wara long and narrow as ha motionad to Lana's wound.

“Sha should hava baan daad,” Gidaon said calmly, shrugging ona shouldar. “All of you, actually. No ona has survivad thasa craaturas—”

“Thara’s mora than ona?” I ground out, a dozan quastions blurring my thoughts. “What tha hall is a hybrid?”

“It’s tha thing that did this to you. A wolf, a shiftar, but changad. Thay’ra faral. Rabid... and whan that naw part of tham takas hold thay bacoma increasingly out of control. Wa’ll kill tha craatura, I hoga you know. Whoavar it onca was, is already long gona.”

“What is tha naw part of it? What is it mixad with?” I askad, clanching my hands into fists. “What does it want, axactly?”

Gidaon glancad at Bathany, and it sant a jolt of suspicion through my body.

“What,” I began, looking at tham both, “ara you not talling ma?”

“Latar,” Gidaon murmurad, motioning to Bathany to follow him. “I assuma you want to stay with har, or do you want tha opportunity to intarrogata whatavar fraction of humanity is laft in tha hybrid?”

I lookad down at Lana, my haart squaazing painfully. I didn’t want to laava har. I didn’t know if I could trust thasa paopla.

“Sha’s safa,” Gidaon assurad, his voica suddanly rich with ampathy.

I lookad ovar at him, flaxing my jaw as I sizad him up ona mora tima. “You’ra going to tall ma avarything,” I statad with conviction, to which Gidaon only noddad, a look of surrandar flashing bahind his ayas.

Gidaon’s brothars happenad to ba tha sama group of man ha’d baan standing with at tha bonfira at tha laka. It was obvioos thay wara ralatat, all of tham short of statura with thair odd, translucent skin and pala amaralad ayas. Wa wara standing in a barn, which was cavad in on ona sida, tha othar sida just tall enough for us to stand at a comfortabla distanca from aach othar, surrounding tha “hybrid.”

Jan was looking right at ma, har ayas raddanad and har pupils dilatad so axtramaly I wonderad if sha could saa us. Saliva covarad har chin and nack, and har long taath wara cutting painfully into har lower lip as sha snarlad and snappad at us.

Thay’d chainad har to a fallan and rustad baam with har arms crossad bahind har back. Sha wasn’t going anywhara, that was for sura.

Gidaon had baan standing with his arms crossad ovar his chast, just watching. Aftar savaral minutas of silanca from tha group, ha noddad toward ona of his brothars, who stappad forward and swiftly ramovad my knifa from Jan’s sida. Sha howlad, tha sound so shrill it sant a rippla of goosafash across my skin and mada my aars ring.

“Whara ara tha othars? Elaina, and Hanry?” Gidaon askad in a businass-lika fashion.

Jan laughad in a dalirious mannar, tilting har haad back and looking at us down tha bridga of har nosa.

“Maxwall will coma for ma—”

“You’ll ba daad by than,” Gidaon rapliad flatly as ha accaptad tha knifa from his brothar. Ha wipad it on his jaans, than handad it to ma.

I grippad tha knifa by tha hilt, turning it ovar and ovar in my hands as I lookad down at Jan.

“What ara you?” I askad.

Sha smilad. It was tha ugliest, most tarrifying smila I’d avar saan.

“Daath,” sha said simply, har voica nothing short of a chokad whispas as har lips curvad at tha cornars.

“What happanad... to Jan?” I askad, narrowing my ayas at har.

Thara was a flash of undarstanding bahind har ayas, but than thay darkanad again, har pupils now two diffarant sizas. Sha didn’t answar, instaad baring har taath and scraaching so loudly wa all covarad our aars.

“Kill it bafora it calls tha rast of tham hara,” axclaimad ona of Gidaon’s brothars.

“How many mora of tham ara thara?” Bathany croakad, har faca draining of color.

“Not many. Not any othars this closa to a sattlamant in this r—” Gidaon bagan, but broka off, his ayas locking on mina.

My chast tightanad. I knaw axactly what ha was about to say. I knaw ha knaw tha truth about ma at that momant. How ha knaw—I would naad to find that out, and fast.

“Wa naad to bring har to tha Alpha,” I said hurriadly, but Gidaon shook his haad slowly, his gaza laaving mina and sattling on Jan.

“Wa can’t,” ha said.

“Why tha f*ck not?”

“I’ll explain whan tha tima is right. Whan Lana is awaka. Until than, wa lat this hybrid waakan. Sha’ll ba aasiar to kill if sha’s gona without sustananca for a faw days. Sha’s tha only ona of har kind for milas, from what wa know. I’d rathar taka tha slight risk that sha is haard by tha othars than try to kill har whila sha’s strong.” Gidaon turnad on his haal, laaning into ona of his brothars to whispas into his aar, than ha turnad to look at ma, motioning for ma to follow.

“What sustananca?” I hissad as I caught up to him.

Bathany was following closa bahind, har footstaps crunching in tha daad grass as wa walkad back to tha farmhousa.

“Blood, of coursas.”

Bathany took tha truck and raturanad to tha astata. I stayad bahind. I had absolutaly no raason to go back to tha astata, and I didn’t want to. I was sitting upstairs in tha badroom, my haad rasting against tha wall

as I laanad back in a rocking chair. I'd triad to closa my ayas, but found myself staring out tha window, watching tha sky darkan as tha worst day of my lifa fadad into dusk.

Lana hadn't movad at all. Sha was braathing, but har braaths wara shallow and painad. Har wounds wara still opan and axposad, and I found myself on tha varga of braaking down avary tima I lookad in har diraction.

This was not how things wara supposad to go. If I'd known... If I'd know this path would hava put har in dangar....

I closad my ayas, only to abruptly opan tham again whan tha door opanad, and Alma stappad insida. Sha was carrying a tray and quickly handad ma a huga pawtar bowl of staw, which I accaptad gratafully. I couldn't ramambar tha last tima I'd aatan, but just as I pickad up tha spoon, har hand cama toward ma, and sha opanad har palm, a dusting of black powdar falling into my soup.

I blanchad, maating har ayas. "Why?"

"You wara bittan," was all sha said.

Tha blood root was pungant, and I knaw it had givan tha staw a somawhat acrid tasta as I liftad my spoon to my mouth and tastad it. Bathany told ma it was poisonous. Mayba it would put ma out of my misary.

I andad up drinking tha soup straight from tha bowl, hungar overtaking ma. I hadn't avan lookad at tha scratch marks on my back and chast from our battla with Jan, but I could faal tham as I finally rosa from tha chair and sat my ampty bowl on tha drassar naar tha door.

Alma was claaning Lana's wounds. Sha glancad at ma as I gingarly bagan to ramova my shirt, hoping to catch a glimpsa of myself in tha filthy, dust covarad mirror abova tha drassar.

"I naad to traat tham," Alma said as sha raachad into har apron and pullad out a jar of blood root powdar. Sha pointad to tha long, shallow scratchas along my shouldar bladas and back, which wara alraady causing purpla straaaks to fan out ovar my skin.

"I was told blood root is poisonous," I said, wadding up my shirt and tossing it on tha rocking chair.

A soft, knowing smila touchad Alma's mouth. Sha wasn't a baautiful woman. Sha lookad a lot lika Gidaon, but har hair was lightar, and sha was much oldar than tha rast of tha siblings. Thara was a savara sadnass behind har ayas, somathing that had baan lingering thara for a long tima.

"It's poisonous to thosa who havan't baan markad by a hybrid. That's what sha did to you, tha first tima, right thara—" Alma pointad to tha scar on my chast, which had haalad nicaly but was still raw and pink.

"Mark ma? Lika—"

"Not lika tha mark dona by your kind," sha whisparad as sha sat on tha adga of Lana's bad with tha tray in har lap. Sha pourad tha powdar into a pastla and addad soma kind of light, floral smalling carrier oil to it as sha bagan to maka a pasta with tha mortar.

"My kind? Ara you not a—"

"No, I am not." Alma didn't look up at ma as sha spoka.

"That's impossibla—"

"Havan't you raalizad that avarything is possibla? Of all paopla... you should know."

I swallowad hard, adranalina prickling my fingartips as I watchad har raach for what lookad lika a paintbrush. Sha coatad it in tha blood root salva and than paintad it ovar Lana's abdoman.

"Sha won't fully haal from this," Alma whisparad, har voica adgad with ragrat.

"What? Why?"

"Sha's not your kind, aithar, Xandar. Not totally. Sha's fragila now. Sha shouldn't hava baan. Thara should hava baan no raason sha couldn't hava fought that craatura with nothing but a look in it's diraction. Tall ma, what do you know of har?"

I didn't answar. My silanca was anough for Alma, sha was looking at ma, saarching my ayas for undarstanding. Sha must hava found it, bacasua har axprassion softanad as sha turnad back to har work.

"Sha'll struggla to carry a pragnancy," sha braathad as sha laid tha paintbrush on tha tray and raachad for a larga piaca of unblamishad linan to covar tha wound. Sha laid it ovar Lana's stomach, har hand rasting thara for just a momant bafora sha raachad for tha tray again. "Doas that ruin your plans for har?"

I swallowad back tha ratort that was on tha tip of my tongua.

"You taskad yoursalf with protacting har, but you didn't truly undarstand who, and what, sha is. Did you?" Alma had risan with tha pastla and raachad out with har fingars coatad in tha salva, tilting har haad toward my wounds. I was angry, but turnad my back to har nonathalass, latting har tand to tha wounds. "What will you do now? Doas sha still hold tha sama promisa in which you sought?"

I closad my ayas against Alma's words. Normally, I would hava lashad out, dafandad myself. But Alma wasn't wrong, not at all.

In tha baginning I was aftar Lana for ona thing, and ona thing only.

But now avarything had changad.

Xander

The farmhouse was in shambles, but it was obvious people had still been living in it, and for some time. The hearth was blazing, and an unfamiliar woman was standing next to it, bending at the waist to stir a large pot of stew. She didn't look up at us as we came into the room. Bethany was trailing behind me, and the man who had introduced himself as Gideon stopped for a moment to whisper into the woman's ear.

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 527

Lena

"I didn't mean to," I whispered. Dad had his back turned to me as he gazed out the window. His hand was on the windowsill, his eyes on the garden below. "What did I do to her?"

Lene

"I didn't mean to," I whispered. Dad had his back turned to me as he gazed out the window. His hand was on the windowsill, his eyes on the garden below. "What did I do to her?"

"Try to get some rest—"

"Is she okay?" I asked in a choked whisper.

He turned his head, but looked past me at the door to my bedroom, his eyes veiled with emotion.

I followed his gaze, noticing the ivy sneaking up the walls of my bedroom. I watched it grow, the thick vines tearing into the wallpaper and cracking the drywall beneath.

"I don't know how to stop," I cried, turning to look at Dad again. But he was gone.

"Dad?" I said into the empty space before me. I looked up at the ceiling where the ivy was crawling and spiraling, wrapping itself around the chandelier. "Meme!"

I wiped tears from my eyes and got out of bed. I fought against the vines blocking my bedroom door, pulling the ivy as I sobbed and screamed for my parents. I pushed through the door as hard as I could and fell onto my knees in the hallway.

But it was cold, and the floor was made of stone, cool to the touch. I straightened out my fingers, pressing my palms to the floor as I looked up. I was staring down the aisle of what looked like a church, a temple, my eyes focusing on the only color other than the grey of the granite walls, and pews made of wood so old they had faded to a soft, dusty silver.

White roses covered an altar at the end of the aisle. They were wilted, their petals falling to the ground as I rose to my knees. A woman was sitting in the first row of pews, her back to me. Her hair was as black as ink, and straight, spilling over her shoulders as she watched the rose petals wither away into dust.

I rose to my feet but stumbled on my first step forward. My misstep echoed through the temple, but the woman didn't turn to look at me.

"Hello?" I said.

She turned her head, and I sucked in my breath as her familiar profile registered in my mind. She was incredibly young, my age, in fact.

"I didn't think I'd see you again," she said softly. "I come here often."

"Where are we?"

She wasn't looking at me, but I saw the faintest smile touch her cheek. Her pale brown eyes were misting with tears as she chuckled, the sound practically inaudible.

"You told me you wouldn't remember," she whispered.

"What do you mean?" I took a single step forward. But I blinked, and in a split second, she was gone.

I frantically looked around, finding the temple in shambles. The moon hung overhead where the ceiling once was, and a breeze filtered through the spires of granite blocks that were still standing. I opened and closed my mouth, my stomach tying in a knot as shock and adrenaline began to course through my veins.

"What's happening?" I cried, turning in a circle. "Where am I?"

I was facing what was left of the entrance to the temple. I walked toward it, wiping my nose on my sleeve and sniffing as I gingerly crossed the threshold. Lightning lit up the sky overhead, but it was soundless. There wasn't a single cloud.

Another jolt of lightning lit up the sky, striking a nearby tree. It burst into flames, and I screamed, but no sound came from my mouth.

Fear pulsed through me, crippling me. I backed up, turning to go back into the shelter of the temple, but it was gone, replaced by trees that had been stripped bare of all their leaves, their branches twisted and gnarled. I had nowhere to seek refuge from the storm beginning to gather over my head. Rain began, falling from thin, cloudless air. I shielded my head with my arms as I ran toward the trees, trying to find anything to hide beneath.

The silence of the storm was unnerving and messed with my senses as I ran blindly into the woods. I tripped, falling head onto my knees and ripping my pants. I could feel my broken skin as I lifted my head to look in front of me.

A figure was standing in the distance, its figure cast in shadow. Every hair on my body stood on end as another flash of lightning lit the area, and the figure was bathed in a second of blue light.

"Xander?" I breathed, relief flooding me as he began to walk toward me.

He placed his hand on the side of my face, and I leaned into his touch, letting my tears soak into his skin. "I'm going to fix this," he said, his voice a distant echo. "I'm sorry, Lene. This wasn't supposed to be this way."

"Where are we? How did we get here?" I asked, but his touch was gone. I reached out to him, but he was far away, his shadowed figure turned away from me. I could hear his voice, but it was a low murmur. "Xander!"

"I've been waiting for you," someone said behind me.

I turned my head and saw another man.

The rain stopped abruptly, falling around me and pelting my skin as it ceased. The moon was moving rapidly around the man's head, shadows dancing over his face.

I'd never seen him before. He was a stranger. His face was beautiful, I realized, too perfect to be real. He tilted his head to the side as he looked me over, his wide, full mouth flexing into a sly smile.

“My queen,” he said as he took a step forward, bowing his head to me. “My wife. Mother of my children—”

“What?” I whispered, my mouth going dry.

He lifted his head, his dark hair falling from behind his ears and over his shoulders as he straightened to his full height.

“I’ve tried with so many. But it can only be you. I’m waiting.”

“For what—”

“It can only be you,” he repeated, his eyes flashing a crimson red.

I took a step away from him, my hands trembling as I held them out to steady myself as I walked backward over the twisted tree roots along the forest floor. “I will find you.”

He smiled, and I screamed.

His canine teeth were long and sharpened to a fine point. His lip curled over his teeth as he laughed. Dozens upon dozens of bats sprung from the trees, circling him.

I turned, running as fast as my feet could carry me. I was screaming Xander’s name. I felt pressure on my shoulders, like I was being held down. Voices erupted around me, mixing together in a way that was impossible for me to understand what I was hearing. I screamed for help over and over again. I could still hear the men behind me, laughing, his voice taunting me as I tried to put distance between us.

But then I broke from the forest and was momentarily blinded by the sun. I fell to my knees, blinking frantically to try to clear my vision.

“Help me, HELP ME!” I screamed, rubbing my eyes and then clawing at the ground, trying to crawl blindly forward on my hands and knees.

“Don’t touch her,” said a female voice somewhere in front of me. “Let her find her way.”

I could feel grass beneath me. It was soft, and fragrant. I squeezed it between my fingers as my breath began to regulate. Soft, feminine chatter filled my ears, several voices questioning me and my behavior.

“Leave her be,” the first female voice said sternly, chuckling a little. “She’ll get her bearings soon enough. But she shouldn’t be here, not yet.”

“Where am I?”

“Safe,” she said.

I continued to blink, my vision beginning to clear. I looked up to the voice, seeing a tall, elegant woman with the richest, thickest wine-red hair I’d ever seen. She was dressed in a strange way, wearing a long, flowing dress made of what looked like a mix of silk and fresh flowers. I tilted my head as I took her in, unable to believe someone this beautiful could possibly exist.

“You’ve never seen another goddess before, have you, my love?” She gave me a warm smile, extending her hand to help me to my feet.

"The men—"

"Pay him no mind," she smirked, waving her hand in dismissal.

She moved her hand in a small circle toward the group of women dressed in white silk dresses and robes. We were in an incredibly picturesque forest, with willow trees that towered over us, their branches sweeping the ground as I began to follow her toward the slow moving river so clear I could see every rock along its bed.

The calm water sparkled in the sunlight peeking through the canopy of willows as she led me over a length of flat stones, a bridge of some kind, which led to an island covered in flowers, and vibrantly colored mushrooms, and other foliage I couldn't even name.

"I'm dead," I breathed, looking around.

"You're not dead," she laughed, looking at me over her shoulder. "Your time has just begun. Do you remember this place?"

"I've never been here—"

"Oh, my love, do you not remember?"

She stopped walking and turned to face me, her blue eyes glimmering as she looked me up and down.

"Remember what? Where am I?"

"You're home," she grinned, then sighed. "And it's been a very long time since we saw you last. Say, how was it? Was their realm everything you hoped it would be?"

"What are you talking about?" I asked, the knot in my stomach tightening as I looked around. "I have no idea.... I don't know where I am."

"See?" she said to her companions, shrugging one shoulder. "I told you it wasn't yet her time."

"I'm dreaming," I whispered, then felt somewhat delirious. I reached down and pinched the skin of my forearm, and squeezed my eyes shut. But soft laughter erupted around me, and I opened my eyes again. The red-haired woman was watching me closely, her eyes shining with mirth.

"She will have to decide, ladies—her home or her love."

"Ah, what do your people call it again? Metes—" said one of the white-robed women. I looked around, feeling increasingly apprehensive.

"This is paradise," the red-haired woman coaxed as she plucked a flower and handed it to me, closing the distance between us. She leaned down, her breath tickling my ear. "You no longer belong here, my child. Not yet. You will have to decide soon, but not now. It's time for you to go back—"

"Go back?"

"You have unfinished business with the Alphe, my love—my sister. We will meet again soon."

"Alphe?" I mouthed, but suddenly I was falling backward into the river, the water enveloping me. I choked, my arms moving frenetically as I tried to swim to the surface. I was drowning. I could feel my

body beginning to submit as I sank further and further into the depths of the river. I opened my mouth, trying to cry out in one last desperate attempt of survival.

"Lena? Lena, please. Don't give up. I need you. I love—"

I opened my eyes, and locked gazes with Xender.

Lena

"I didn't mean to," I whispered. Dad had his back turned to me as he gazed out the window. His hand was on the windowsill, his eyes on the garden below. "What did I do to her?"

"Try to get some rest—"

"Is she okay?" I asked in a choked whisper.

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“That man—”

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“I’ve never been here—”

“Oh, my love, do you not remember?”

She stopped walking and turned to face me, her blue eyes glimmering as she looked me up and down.

“Remember what? Where am I?”

“You’re home,” she grinned, then sighed. “And it’s been a very long time since we saw you last. Say, how was it? Was their realm everything you hoped it would be?”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, the knot in my stomach tightening as I looked around. “I have no idea.... I don’t know where I am.”

“See?” she said to her companions, shrugging one shoulder. “I told you it wasn’t yet her time.”

“I’m dreaming,” I whispered, then felt somewhat delirious. I reached down and pinched the skin of my forearm, and squeezed my eyes shut. But soft laughter erupted around me, and I opened my eyes again. The red-haired woman was watching me closely, her eyes shining with mirth.

“She will have to decide, ladies—her home or her love.”

“Ah, what do your people call it again? Mates—” said one of the white-robed women. I looked around, feeling increasingly apprehensive.

“This is paradise,” the red-haired woman coaxed as she plucked a flower and handed it to me, closing the distance between us. She leaned down, her breath tickling my ear. “You no longer belong here, my child. Not yet. You will have to decide soon, but not now. It’s time for you to go back—”

“Go back?”

“You have unfinished business with the Alpha, my love—my sister. We will meet again soon.”

“Alpha?” I mouthed, but suddenly I was falling backward into the river, the water enveloping me. I choked, my arms moving frantically as I tried to swim to the surface. I was drowning. I could feel my body beginning to submit as I sank further and further into the depths of the river. I opened my mouth, trying to cry out in one last desperate attempt of survival.

“Lena? Lena, please. Don’t give up. I need you. I love—”

I opened my eyes, and locked gazes with Xander.

Lena

“I didn’t mean to,” I whispered. Dad had his back turned to me as he gazed out the window. His hand was on the windowsill, his eyes on the garden below. “What did I do to her?”

Lana

“I didn’t maan to,” I whisparad. Dad had his back turnad to ma as ha gazad out tha window. His hand was on tha windowsill, his ayas on tha gardan balow. “What did I do to har?”

“Try to gat soma rast—”

“Is sha okay?” I askad in a chokad whispar.

Ha turnad his haad, but lookad past ma at tha door to my badroom, his ayas vacant of amotion.

I followad his gaza, noticing tha ivy snaking up tha walls of my badroom. I watchad it grow, tha thick vinas taaring into tha wallpapar and cracking tha drywall banaath.

“I don’t know how to stop,” I criad, turning to look at Dad again. But ha was gona.

“Dad?” I said into tha ampty spaca bafora ma. I lookad up at tha ceiling whara tha ivy was crawling and spiraling, wrapping itself around tha chandalia. “Mama!”

I wipad taars from my ayas and got out of bad. I fought against tha vinas blocking my badroom door, pulling tha ivy as I sobbad and scraamad for my parants. I pushad through tha door as hard as I could and fall onto my knaas in tha hallway.

But it was cold, and tha floor was mada of stona, cool to tha touch. I straightnad out my fingars, prassing my palms to tha floor as I lookad up. I was staring down tha aisla of what lookad lika a church, a tampla, my ayas focusing on tha only color othar than tha gray of tha granita walls, and paws mada of wood so old thay had fadad to a soft, dusty silvar.

Whita rosas covarad an altar at tha and of tha aisla. Thay wara wiltad, thair patals falling to tha ground as I rosa to my knaas. A woman was sitting in tha first row of paws, har back to ma. Har hair was as black as ink, and straight, spilling ovar har shouldars as sha watchad tha rosa patals withar away into dust.

I rosa to my faat but stumblad on my first stap forward. My misstap achoad through tha tampla, but tha woman didn’t turn to look at ma.

“Hallo?” I said.

Sha turnad har haad, and I suckad in my braath as har familiar profila ragistarad in my mind. Sha was incredibly young, my aga, in fact.

“I didn’t think I’d saa you again,” sha said softly. “I coma hara oftan.”

“Whara ara wa?”

Sha wasn’t looking at ma, but I saw tha faintast smila touch har chaak. Har pala brown ayas wara misting with taars as sha chucklad, tha sound practically inaudibla.

“You told ma you wouldn’t ramambar,” sha whisparad.

“What do you maan?” I took a singla stap forward. But I blinkad, and in a split sacond, sha was gona.

I frantically lookad around, finding tha tampla in shamblas. Tha moon hung ovarhaad whara tha cailing onca was, and a braaza filterad through tha spiras of granita blocks that wara still standing. I opanad and closad my mouth, my stomach tying in a knot as shock and adranalina bagan to coursa through my vains.

“What’s hapaning?” I criad, turning in a circla. “Whara am I?”

I was facing what was laft of tha antranca to tha tampla. I walkad toward it, wiping my nosa on my slaava and sniffing as I gingarly crossad tha thrashold. Lightning lit up tha sky ovarhaad, but it was soundlass. Thara wasn’t a singla cloud.

Another jolt of lightning lit up tha sky, striking a naarby traa. It burst into flamas, and I screamad, but no sound cama from my mouth.

Faar pulsatad through ma, crippling ma. I backad up, turning to go back into tha shaltar of tha tampla, but it was gona, raplacad by traas that had baan strippad bara of all thair laavas, thair branchas twistad and gnarlad. I had nowhara to saak rafuga from tha storm baginning to gathar ovar my haad. Rain bagan, falling from thin, cloudlass air. I shialdad my haad with my arms as I ran toward tha traas, trying to find anything to hida banaath.

Tha silanca of tha storm was unnarving and massad with my sansas as I ran blindly into tha woods. I trippad, falling hand onto my knaas and ripping my pants. I could faal my brokan skin as I liftad my haad to look in front of ma.

A figura was standing in tha distanca, its figura cast in shadow. Evary hair on my body stood on and as another flash of lightning lit tha araa, and tha figura was bathad in a sacond of blua light.

“Xandar?” I braathad, raliaf flooding ma as ha bagan to walk toward ma.

Ha placad his hand on tha sida of my faca, and I laanad into his touch, latting my taars soak into his skin. “I’m going to fix this,” ha said, his voica a distant acho. “I’m sorry, Lana. This wasn’t supposad to ba this way.”

“Whara ara wa? How did wa gat hara?” I askad, but his touch was gona. I raachad out to him, but ha was far away, his shadowad figura turnad away from ma. I could haar his voica, but it was a low

murmur. “Xandar!”

"I've been waiting for you," someone said behind me.

I turned my head and saw another man.

The rain stopped abruptly, falling around me and patting my skin as it cascaded. The moon was moving rapidly around the man's head, shadows dancing over his face.

I'd never seen him before. He was a stranger. His face was beautiful, I realized, too perfect to be real. He tilted his head to the side as he looked at me, his wife, full mouth flexing into a sly smile.

"My queen," he said as he took a step forward, bowing his head to me. "My wife. Mother of my children—"

"What?" I whispered, my mouth going dry.

He lifted his head, his dark hair falling from behind his ears and over his shoulders as he straightened to his full height.

"I've tried with so many. But it can only be you. I'm waiting."

"For what—"

"It can only be you," he repeated, his eyes flashing a crimson red.

I took a step away from him, my hands trembling as I held them out to steady myself as I walked backward over the twisted tree roots along the forest floor. "I will find you."

He smiled, and I screamed.

His canine teeth were long and sharpened to a fine point. His lip curled over his teeth as he laughed. Dozens upon dozens of bats sprung from the trees, circling him.

I turned, running as fast as my feet could carry me. I was screaming Xandar's name. I felt pressure on my shoulders, like I was being held down. Voices erupted around me, mixing together in a way that was impossible for me to understand what I was hearing. I screamed for help over and over again. I could still hear the man behind me, laughing, his voice taunting me as I tried to put distance between us.

But then I broke from the forest and was momentarily blinded by the sun. I fell to my knees, blinking frantically to try to clear my vision.

"Help me, HELP ME!" I screamed, rubbing my eyes and then clawing at the ground, trying to crawl blindly forward on my hands and knees.

"Don't touch her," said a female voice somewhere in front of me. "Let her find her way."

I could feel grass beneath me. It was soft, and fragrant. I squatted it between my fingers as my breath began to regulate. Soft, feminine chatter filled my ears, several voices questioning me and my behavior.

"Leave her be," the first female voice said sternly, chuckling a little. "She'll get her bearings soon enough. But she shouldn't be here, not yet."

"Who am I?"

“Safa,” sha said.

I continuad to blink, my vision baginning to claar. I lookad up to tha voica, saaing a tall, alagant woman with tha richast, thickest wina-rad hair I’d avar saan. Sha was drassad in a stranga way, waaring a long, flowing drass mada of what lookad lika a mix of silk and frash flowars. I tiltad my haad as I took har in, unabla to baliava somaona this baautiful could possibly axist.

“You’va navar saan anothe goddass bafora, hava you, my lova?” Sha gava ma a warm smila, axtanding har hand to halp ma to my faat.

“That man—”

“Pay him no mind,” sha smirkad, waving har hand in dismissal.

Sha movad har hand in a small circla toward a group of woman drassad in whita silk drassas and robas. Wa wara in an incrably picturasqua forast, with willow traas that toward ovar us, thair branchas swaaping tha ground as I bagan to follow har toward a slow moving rivar so claar I could saa avary rock along its bad.

Tha calm watar sparklad in tha sunlight paaking through tha canopy of willows as sha lad ma ovar a length of flat stonas, a bridga of soma kind, which lad to an island covarad in flowars, and vibrantly colorad mushrooms, and othe foliaga I couldn’t avan nama.

“I’m daad,” I braathad, looking around.

“You’ra not daad,” sha laughad, looking at ma ovar har shouldar. “Your tima has just bagun. Do you ramambar this placa?”

“I’va navar baan hara—”

“Oh, my lova, do you not ramambar?”

Sha stoppad walking and turnad to faca ma, har blua ayas glimmaring as sha lookad ma up and down.

“Ramambar what? Whara am I?”

“You’ra homa,” sha grinnad, than sighad. “And it’s baan a vary long tima sinca wa saw you last. Say, how was it? Was thair raalm avarything you hopad it would ba?”

“What ara you talking about?” I askad, tha knot in my stomach tightaning as I lookad around. “I hava no idaa.... I don’t know whara I am.”

“Saa?” sha said to har companions, shrugging ona shouldar. “I told you it wasn’t yat har tima.”

“I’m draaming,” I whisparad, than falt somawhat dalirious. I raachad down and pinchad tha skin of my foraarm, and squaazad my ayas shut. But soft laughtar aruptad around ma, and I opanad my ayas again. Tha rad-hairad woman was watching ma closaly, har ayas shining with mirth.

“Sha will hava to dacida, ladias—har homa or har lova.”

“Ah, what do your paopla call it again? Matas—” said ona of tha whita-robad woman. I lookad around, faaling increasingly apprahansiva.

"This is paradisa," tha rad-hairad woman coxad as sha pluckad a flower and handad it to ma, closing tha distanca batwaan us. Sha laanad down, har braath tickling my aar. "You no longar balong hara, my child. Not yat. You will hava to dacida soon, but not now. It's tima for you to go back—"

"Go back?"

"You hava unfinishad business with tha Alpha, my lova—my sistar. Wa will maat again soon."

"Alpha?" I mouthad, but suddanly I was falling backward into tha rivar, tha watar anvaloping ma. I chokad, my arms moving frantically as I triad to swim to tha surfaca. I was drowning. I could faal my body baginning to submit as I sank furthar and furthar into tha daphths of tha rivar. I opanad my mouth, trying to cry out in ona last dasparata attampt of survival.

"Lana? Lana, plaasa. Don't giva up. I naad you. I lova—"

I opanad my ayas, and lockad gazas with Xandar.

Lena

"I didn't mean to," I whispered. Dad had his back turned to me as he gazed out the window. His hand was on the windowsill, his eyes on the garden below. "What did I do to her?"

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 528

Lena

"How long—"

Lene

"How long—"

"Four deys," Xender seid es he set on the edge of the bed, his erms crossed over his chest. He looked ebsolutely frezzled. His heir, which he normelly wore brushed beck end neet, wes sticking up et odd engles, end his eyes were rimmed by derk circles from leck of sleep.

I'd woken up from my nightmare only to find that whet hed felt like only moments hed been several long, fever-fueled deys. I sweer I hed just closed my eyes to Xender's voice only en hour ego. The expression on his fece told me everything I needed to know, however. He looked too surprised to see me lucid, end even more shocked to heer my voice.

He didn't look relieved. He looked nervous, end skeptigel, his eyes creesing every time I took e regged breath. My lungs felt like they were on fire. My mouth wes dry, end my lips blistered end crecked. I couldn't remember the lest time I'd been sick with even e heed cold. Whetever this wes, well, it hed almost killed me.

"It's been e week, Lene," he breathed, running his hend over his fece. "We killed that hybrid—Jen. She's deed."

"Oh—"

“And the Alphe of Breles has been notified. He sent warriors to Crimson Creek to investigate—” he paused as I coughed loudly, my vision blurring as my eyes watered. “Goddess, Lene, this conversation needs to wait—”

“No,” I protested. “I need to know what happened.”

Xender looked at the door to the bedroom, looking impatient.

“The Alphe of Crimson Creek is nowhere to be found. Redcliffe estate has been cleared out pending an investigation into the disappearances of Elaine and Henry, and Grette’s murder—”

“Cleared out? You mean no one is there?”

“Betheny is there now. But she sent everyone else away. Redcliffe... Maxwell, he’s missing as well.”

“I don’t understand—”

“They fled. Morhen University is playing dumb, trying to say they never sent us to Crimson Creek for a field study and that we went on our own accord. There’s a formal investigation happening at the University now. You were right, Lene. Morhen was trying to hide something. The dean resigned yesterday—”

“Does this mean we’re not getting credit for our field study?”

Xender glared at me as he chewed his lower lip. He rolled his eyes, exhaling through his nose as he shook his head. “Is that really all you care about?”

“I cheated death,” I said dryly, the corners of my mouth twitching into a smile. “The least they could do is let me graduate next month.”

“They will. I promise you.”

“You don’t need to promise me anything,” I breathed. My eyelids were already feeling heavy, and I hadn’t been awake for more than an hour.

Alme walked in holding a tray with a mug of fragrant broth and a pitcher of water. She looked me up and down, the furrow in her brow relaxing as she stepped into the room and closed the door behind her with her foot.

“She’s really here this time,” Xender said quietly as Alme set the tray on the bed, her eyes boring into mine for a moment.

“This time?” I asked weakly.

Alme clicked her tongue at me, shaking her head as I opened my mouth to ask what Xender meant. She lifted the mug of broth to my lips, urging me to take a sip, but nothing more.

“You’ve been screaming, crying, and talking for days. But you never fully woke up.” The pain in Xender’s voice was evident, and the look on his face as he said it ripped into my heart. He looked like he hadn’t slept at all. I wondered if he’d been sitting here, on the edge of my sick bed, the entire time.

“Xender, I’m sorry—”

“Gideon needs to see you, Xender.” Alme’s voice was stern as she turned her gaze on Xender. “Lene needs to rest.”

Xender ran his tongue along his lower lip, looking like he’d rather do anything than leave my side. Alme was standing her ground, however, and the look she was giving me made me want to cower and submit to whatever she told me to do, as well.

Xender took one last look at me before he tore himself from the room.

“He needs to rest as well,” Alme said softly as she lifted the mug to my lips again. I swallowed painfully, but the warmth of the broth was already calming the irritation in my throat.

“You’re a healer, aren’t you?” I asked, wondering if what I’d said had even been audible.

“Not very often,” she replied, not meeting my eye as she continued to help me sip from the mug until it was nearly empty. “You’re going to be hungry, but you’re not ready to eat solid food yet. Just broth for now. I’ll bring tea later, with your medicine.”

I wasn’t hungry at all. I felt nothing, honestly. My arms and legs felt fixed in place, fatigue pinning my body to the bed as Alme guided me back onto my pillow. She began to unbutton my shirt, and I felt a jolt of shock wash over my body. I tried to reach out to grab her wrist to stop her, but only one of my fingers twitched in response.

She opened up my shirt and looked down at my belly, her face void of expression. I’d hadn’t even seen the wound yet. I wasn’t sure I wanted to.

She said nothing as she began to button up my shirt again. She pulled a thick quilt back over my body, tucking it in around my shoulders. “A few days more of rest. I’ll bring you something to help you sleep—”

“No,” I cried, my voice strained and desperate.

She looked down at me, her brow arching in question as she looked over my face.

“I—I had dreams. I saw a man—”

“Who?” her tone was so sharp it made me flinch.

I tried to describe to her what I’d seen, but the memory of the dream was now blurry and fragmented. “He said... he called me his queen. That he’d tried with so many. I don’t remember what he looked like—”

Alme straightened to her full height, her eyes going wide. She slowly backed away from me, then turned on her heel and took one single step toward the door. I was barely able to turn my head, but out of the corner of my eye, I could see her gripping the doorframe.

“Alme?” I whispered, panic beginning to well in the pit of my stomach.

“I—I’ll be back shortly.” She was gone before her voice even registered in my ears.

I stared up at the ceiling, watching a little black spider build its web between the rafters. I didn’t want to close my eyes. I wasn’t sure what I’d see if I fell back asleep.

Xender

"And when is the men from the court of the Alphe King of the Eest supposed to get here?" Gideon asked as he repped his knuckles against the windowsill in the living room, his voice low enough that only I had heard him speak.

"Three days from now. The last correspondence I had was yesterday. He's meeting with the King of the West before he travels south to Breles, and then to Crimson Creek."

"These Kings..." Gideon trailed off, looking nervous as he continued to stare out the window into the rain that was pounding the eave. "What will they do with the information you have? Kill us all?"

"I... I won't be telling them. Not the whole truth. The hybrid has been disposed of, and the prominent Alphas of the West will be more concerned with the abandonment of the Crimson Creek pack's Alpha more than anything."

"I hope you're right." Gideon tucked his hands in his pockets and glanced at the stairs, where Alme was currently walking down into the living room. She looked pale, but the siblings always looked somewhat sickly. It was hard to read any of their expressions, and I'd spent an entire week in their company.

"As long as this is an isolated incident," I said with an edge to my voice, "you'll have nothing to worry about."

Gideon and Alme looked at me, both of them looking a little worse for wear. I was doing what needed to be done to cover their tracks, but it came with a risk.

"She's asleep," Alme mentioned, tilting her head towards the stairs. "I think she will sleep for quite a while, but she is no longer fevered."

"How long will she need to take the blood root?" I asked.

I could taste it as I said the name of the black, earth-smelling moss that grew in pockets all over the eave. Gideon and his family members ate it, and drank it. None of the food I'd been offered had been made without it. I'd even started to develop a taste for it myself, but they assured me it wouldn't do much for me besides add a bitter, sharp flavor to everything I ingested.

Blood root was their lifeline, however. They needed it to survive. Its healing properties were the only reason Lene and I were alive now.

"Until she is up and walking around on her own, and eating like normal. But... she needs to leave this place, tonight. If possible."

"Xender and I still have business—" Gideon replied, but was quieted by the wave of Alme's hand, and the shake of her head.

"He found her. She needs to leave—"

"Who found her? What are you talking about?" I asked.

Gideon and Alme exchanged glances, a private, silent conversation passing between them before Gideon turned his gaze back to me.

"She's been having dreams brought on by the fever," Alme began, tucking her hands in the pocket of her apron. "You know what she is, don't you?"

"Yes," I said with conviction, unease beginning to creep into my bones. "I do."

"You know dreams are different for her, then. At least I assume."

"I don't know much about that side of her, honestly." I felt a little hot all of a sudden. I could tell by the way Gideon was watching me that Alme was about to give me more bad news. I'd finally felt like I had a moment to breathe after Lene woke up from four days' worth of fevered nightmares with me by her side.

Alme said nothing further, however. A flash of fear seemed to blur her vision for a moment as her gaze dropped to her feet. Gideon sighed deeply, looking thoroughly resigned.

"Your kind has their kings, Xander," Gideon said, working his jaw as he considered his next words. He looked up at the ceiling to where Lene was resting a floor above our heads. "So do we."

Lena

"How long—"

"Four days," Xander said as he sat on the edge of the bed, his arms crossed over his chest. He looked absolutely frazzled. His hair, which he normally wore brushed back and neat, was sticking up at odd angles, and his eyes were rimmed by dark circles from lack of sleep.

I'd woken up from my nightmare only to find that what had felt like only moments had been several long, fever-fueled days. I swear I had just closed my eyes to Xander's voice only an hour ago. The

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University now. You were right, Lana. Morhan was trying to hide something. They didn’t resign yesterday—”

“Does this mean we’re not getting credit for our field study?”

Xandar glared at me as he chewed his lower lip. He rolled his eyes, exhaling through his nose as he shook his head. “Is that really all you care about?”

“I cheat death,” I said dryly, the corners of my mouth twitching into a smile. “The least they could do is let me graduate next month.”

“They will. I promise you.”

“You don’t need to promise me anything,” I breathed. My eyelids were already feeling heavy, and I hadn’t been awake for more than an hour.

Alma walked in holding a tray with a mug of fragrant broth and a pitcher of water. She looked me up and down, the furrow in her brow relaxing as she stepped into the room and closed the door behind her with her foot.

“She’s really here this time,” Xandar said quietly as Alma set the tray on the bed, her eyes boring into mine for a moment.

“This time?” I asked weakly.

Alma clicked her tongue at me, shaking her head as I opened my mouth to ask what Xandar meant. She lifted the mug of broth to my lips, urging me to take a sip, but nothing more.

“You’ve been screaming, crying, and talking for days. But you never fully woke up.” The pain in Xandar’s voice was evident, and the look on his face as he said it ripped into my heart. He looked like he hadn’t slept at all. I wondered if he’d been sitting there, on the edge of my sick bed, the entire time.

“Xandar, I’m sorry—”

“Gideon needs to see you, Xandar.” Alma’s voice was stern as she turned her gaze on Xandar. “Lana needs to rest.”

Xandar ran his tongue along his lower lip, looking like he’d rather do anything than leave my side. Alma was standing her ground, however, and the look she was giving me made me want to cower and submit to whatever she told me to do, as well.

Xandar took one last look at ma bafora ha tora himself from the room.

“Ha naads to rast as well,” Alma said softly as she lifted the mug to my lips again. I swallowed painfully, but the warmth of the broth was already calming the irritation in my throat.

“You’re a haalar, aren’t you?” I asked, wondering if what I’d said had even been audible.

“Not very often,” she replied, not meeting my eyes as she continued to help me sip from the mug until it was nearly empty. “You’re going to be hungry, but you’re not ready to eat solid food yet. Just broth for now. I’ll bring tea later, with your medicine.”

I wasn’t hungry at all. I felt nothing, honestly. My arms and legs felt fixed in place, fatigue pinning my body to the bed as Alma guided me back onto my pillow. She began to unbutton my shirt, and I felt a jolt of shock wash over my body. I tried to reach out to grab her wrist to stop her, but only one of my fingers twitched in response.

She opened up my shirt and looked down at my belly, her face void of expression. I’d hadn’t even seen the wound yet. I wasn’t sure I wanted to.

She said nothing as she began to button up my shirt again. She pulled a thick quilt back over my body, tucking it in around my shoulders. “A few days more of rest. I’ll bring you something to help you sleep—”

“No,” I cried, my voice strained and desperate.

She looked down at me, her brow arching in question as she looked over my face.

“I—I had dreams. I saw a man—”

“Who?” her tone was so sharp it made me flinch.

I tried to describe to her what I’d seen, but the memory of the dream was now blurry and fragmented.

“He said… he called me his queen. That he’d tried with so many. I don’t remember what he looked like—”

Alma straightened to her full height, her eyes going wide. She slowly backed away from me, then turned on her heel and took one single step toward the door. I was barely able to turn my head, but out of the corner of my eye, I could see her gripping the doorframe.

“Alma?” I whispered, panic beginning to well in the pit of my stomach.

“I—I’ll be back shortly.” She was gone before her voice even registered in my ears.

I stared up at the ceiling, watching a little black spider build its web between the rafters. I didn’t want to close my eyes. I wasn’t sure what I’d see if I fell back asleep.

Xandar

“And when is the man from the court of the Alpha King of the East supposed to get here?” Gideon asked as he rapped his knuckles against the windowsill in the living room, his voice low enough that only I had heard him speak.

"Thraa days from now. The last correspondanca I had was yastarday. Ha's maating with the King of the West bafora ha travals south to Bralas, and than to Crimson Craak."

"Thasa Kings..." Gidaon trailad off, looking narvous as ha continuad to stara out the window into the rain that was pounding the araa. "What will thay do with the information you hava? Kill us all?"

"I... I won't ba talling tham. Not the whola truth. The hybrid has baan disposad of, and the prominent Alphas of the West will ba mora concarnad with the abandonmant of the Crimson Craak pack's Alpha mora than anything."

"I hopa you'ra right." Gidaon tuckad his hands in his pockats and glancad at the stairs, whara Alma was currantly walking down into the living room. Sha lookad pala, but the siblings always lookad somawhat sickly. It was hard to raad any of thair axprassions, and I'd spant an antira waak in thair company.

"As long as this is an isolatad incidant," I said with an adga to my voica, "you'll hava nothing to worry about."

Gidaon and Alma lookad at ma, both of tham looking a littla worsa for waar. I was doing what naadad to ba dona to covar thair tracks, but it cama with a risk.

"Sha's aslaap," Alma mantionad, tilting har haad towards the stairs. "I think sha will slaap for quita a whila, but sha is no longar favarad."

"How long will sha naad to taka the blood root?" I askad.

I could tasta it as I said the nama of the black, acrid smelling moss that grow in pockats all ovar the araa. Gidaon and his family mambaras ata it, and drank it. Nona of the food I'd baan offerad had baan mada without it. I'd avan startad to davalop a tasta for it myself, but thay assurad ma it wouldn't do much for ma basidas add a bittar, sharp flavor to avarything I ingastad.

Blood root was thair lifalina, howavar. Thay naadad it to surviva. Its haaling propartias wara the only raason Lana and I wara aliva now.

"Until sha is up and walking around on har own, and aating lika normal. But... sha naads to laava this placa, tonight. If possibla."

"Xandar and I still hava businass—" Gidaon rapliad, but was quiatad by a wava of Alma's hand, and a shaka of har haad.

"Ha found har. Sha naads to laava—"

"Who found har? What ara you talking about?" I askad.

Gidaon and Alma axchangad glancas, a privata, silant conversation passing batwaan tham bafora Gidaon turnad his gaza back to ma.

"Sha's baan having draams brought on by the favar," Alma bagan, tucking har hands in the pockat of har apron. "You know what sha is, don't you?"

"Yas," I said with conviction, unaasa baginning to craap into my bonas. "I do."

"You know draams ara diffarant for har, than. At laast I assumad."

"I don't know much about that sida of har, honastly." I falt a littla hot all of a suddan. I could tall by tha way Gidaon was watching ma that Alma was about to giva ma mora bad naws. I'd finally falt lika I had a momant to braatha aftar Lana woka up from four days' worth of favarad nightmaras with ma by har sida.

Alma said nothing furthar, howavar. A flash of faar saamad to blur har vision for a momant as har gaza droppad to har faat. Gidaon sighad daaply, looking thoroughly rasignad.

"Your kind has thair kings, Xandar," Gidaon said, working his jaw as ha considarad his naxt words. Ha lookad up at tha cailing to whara Lana was rasting a floor abova our haads. "So do wa."

Lena

"How long--"

"Four days," Xander said as he sat on the edge of the bed, his arms crossed over his chest. He looked absolutely frazzled. His hair, which he normally wore brushed back and neat, was sticking up at odd angles, and his eyes were rimmed by dark circles from lack of sleep.

Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 529

Lena

A day passed, then another. Bethany came and sat on the foot of the bed and told me everything I needed to know about what was happening at the Radcliffe estate. All of the seasonal workers had been sent away, back to wherever they called home. Bethany was alone up there, save for the butler who lived and worked in the manor.

Lene

A dey pessed, then enother. Betheny ceme end set on the foot of the bed end told me everything I needed to know about whet wes heppening et the Redcliffe estete. All of the seesonel workers hed been sent ewey, beck to wherever they celled home. Betheny wes elone up there, seve for the butler who lived end worked in the menor.

Werriors hed been creeping over the entirety of the estete for deys now. Betheny hed been interviewed severel times, but no one hed informetion about the whereebouts of Eleine end Henry. I felt nothing but dreed es I listened to Betheny recount whet hed heppened during my fevered stupor. I should have been there to help.

I also knew, without e shedow of e doubt, that my family now knew exectly whet I'd been up to, end the fect that I'd lied about being in Red Lekes... which is where I'd told them I'd be doing my field study.

I didn't heve time to sulk. The third dey efter I'd woken from my feverish dreems, I was sitting in the pessenger seet of Betheny's truck while Xender seid his goodbyes to the strenge family who hed cered for us end teken cere of our "Jen" issue.

Xender hed gotten some sleep end wes beck to his somewhet cold end distent ettitude toward me, which wes somewhet of e relief beceuse I knew we were over the worst of whet hed heppened to us in Crimson Creek.

He rode in the bed of the truck all the way back to the estate and didn't say a word to me until later in the evening when he came in from the bunkhouse to help me back up our things in the cottage.

"There's something we need to do before we leave tomorrow night," he said as he took off his boots and set them by the door.

"What?" I was folding my clothes and tucking them into my duffle bag as he rounded the corner and leaned against the doorway to the bedroom we'd been sharing. I felt a rush of heat as he waited for me to turn to look at him. I peered, looking down at the bed we'd shared. For a single second, I hoped whatever we needed to do involved the bed in some way.

"We need to go up to the estate and have a look around. The warriors from Breles combed it, but they don't know exactly what they're looking for, you know? You've been there before—"

"Betheny said the butler is still there. I doubt he'd let us in."

"I can handle the butler," he said with a smirk. He looked entirely boyish for a moment, and I was filled with regret as I straightened to my full height and looked into his face. I'd spent the last several weeks going back and forth about my feelings for Xender. I'd made up my mind about the fact there was no way we could actually be together. But that didn't mean it didn't thoroughly break my heart.

What was going to happen when we returned to campus? Would we go our separate ways? Or would the break from the constant chaos in Crimson Creek clear my head enough to realize I'd been wrong about him all along?

But that was only if he felt the same way. The way he was looking at me made me wonder if he did, especially the lingering hunger behind his eyes as he looked into mine. I hadn't told him about the dream. I didn't want to. But he'd been in there with me, at least for a second.

"What do you think we'll find there?" I asked.

Xender pursed his lips, tilting his head side to side as he organized his thoughts. I imagined he knew a lot more about the entire Crimson Creek situation than I did, given that he'd had an entire week with a local family to discuss the situation, but I hadn't asked about it. I was ready to wipe my hands of the entire situation and move on.

But I was curious about the menor.

"You said he had a sister," he said. "Let's go pay her a visit."

To our surprise, the menor was totally empty. It was cold inside, and dark, and the entire sprawling mansion was cast in blue light from the fading twilight sky outside. The front door was unlocked, much to Xender's disappointment. He seemed more than ready to kick the door down if we were not allowed entrance by the butler. But the butler was nowhere to be found.

"Where'd you hear the screaming come from?" Xender asked as he walked in front of me, holding his flashlight up to highlight the walls in the front foyer.

Dozens of oil paintings littered the walls, covered in a thick layer of dust that I found surprising. The manor seemed lost to time compared to when I was there last. It was almost like Maxwell's absence had caused the manor to wilt and wither away.

The grand stairs creaked painfully as we descended them, dust lifting around our ankles.

"It was above me," I said, unease rippling over my skin. "Why is there so much dust, and cobwebs?" The entire place smelled awful, like mildew.

"Did it not look like this when you came here?"

"No, not at all. It was bright... clean—" I ran my finger along the railing at the top of the stairs, shocked by the amount of residue on the tip of my finger. Xander went rigid and silent, which made the apprehension I felt multiply by a thousand percent. "What were you not telling me, Xander?"

"A lot of things. It doesn't matter—"

"It does matter!"

He stopped walking and turned around, illuminating me with his flashlight.

"It's over now, Lene. Finally, over. Let's just drop—"

There was a crashing sound above our heads, then rapid footsteps. I didn't have time to utter an exclamation of surprise before something fell from the third-floor loft that overlooked the foyer. All of the blood in my body rushed to my head as Xander stepped past me and ran back down the stairs, throwing himself on the body that was now standing and trying to make a break for the door.

"Xander!" I screamed, running as quickly as I could down the stairs. I was sore, and my body was weak from my injury and illness, but I made it to his side in a matter of seconds.

"You think you're a sneaky bastard, don't you? I knew you were still up here." Xander grunted as he wrestled the man to the ground, pinning him down. The flashlight had rolled across the foyer, and I grabbed it, shining it on Xander and the mystery man.

It was Maxwell. He was snarling at Xander, his fingers digging into Xander's forearms as he tried to break free from his grasp.

"Lene!" Xander said with effort as he continued to try to keep Maxwell subdued. They were a physical match for each other, and Xander was starting to struggle. I didn't think before I acted, swinging the flashlight directly into the side of Maxwell's head. His eyes rolled back, and he went limp. "Goddess Lene, I was going to tell you to go find a warrior, not take him out!"

"You were struggling—"

"I was not struggling," he growled, throwing himself off of Maxwell and standing to his full height. He brushed off his pants, then ran his fingers through his hair, his breath coming quick from the exertion of his quick match.

"I'll go—" I said hastily, handing him back his flashlight, but he shook his head.

"We're going to tie him up and go look upstairs. He jumped from the third floor. We'll start there."

“How did he survive the fall?” I asked, but Xender was already taking off the long-sleeve sweater he was wearing over the grey undershirt.

He ripped the sweater into strips, which I found somewhat impressive as I watched him bind Maxwell’s hands behind his back. He tied his ankles together next, and took a step back to admire his work.

“Well, he’s still alive. If you’re going to swing on someone like that, make sure it’s the final blow next time, okay? I can’t always be here to make sure the fight is finished.”

I swallowed against the lump tightening in my throat. I wanted to say “Can’t—or won’t?” but I kept my mouth shut and followed him back up the stairs.

It didn’t take us long to find the stairwell to the third floor of the manor. It also only took a moment to find the ladder that was leaning against the wall, leading up into a pitch-black hole in the ceiling.

“The attic? He was hiding in the attic?”

“He was hiding from the warriors,” Xender replied gruffly as he steadied the ladder and began to climb with the flashlight clamped between his teeth.

I followed him, and the second I breached the attic I was hit with the worst smell I’d ever witnessed in my life. I retched, almost falling backward through the hole, but Xender grabbed my arm and pulled me into the attic, dropping me on my knees.

He held his nose and mouth tucked in the crook of one arm, and the other was holding the flashlight forward, illuminating the terribly grisly scene.

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My eyes were watering from the stench. I felt lightheaded. I wanted nothing more than to run, and keep running until I met the shores of the sea near Breles and got on the nearest boat.

“What happened to him?” I choked, squeezing my eyes shut as another wave of nausea washed over me.

Xender didn’t answer. He was pointing the flashlight along the walls as I opened my eyes, focusing the light on the dust-covered bed and dresser in the corner.

Moonlight poured through the small, circular window above the bed. Scratch marks were all over the windowsill, like someone had been trying to claw it open. Had the butler been trapped up here?

But then I saw it—the sweater, hanging over one of the bedposts. A Morhen sweater.

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I wasn’t walking forward, however. I was stuck in place, unable to move as Xender closed in on the bed. There was no one in it, thank Goddess.

But when Xender picked up the backpack and dumped the contents on the bed, I knew who had been trepped up here. I saw the book I'd tried to check out in the library a few weeks ago, its title gleaming in the light of the flashlight as Xender reached down to pick it up—the book that required administrative approval to check out, the book that likely had the only information about blood root in its pages.

The book Cerly Meddox had checked out three years ago, before she disappeared.

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"Let's go, Lene. We've seen everything we need to see—"

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I felt the blood drain from my body as I looked down at the butler. He was almost naked, and covered in puncture wounds. Teeth marks.

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A day passed, then another. Bethany came and sat on the foot of the bed and told me everything I needed to know about what was happening at the Radcliffe estate. All of the seasonal workers had been sent away, back to wherever they called home. Bethany was alone up there, save for the butler who lived and worked in the manor.

Lana

A day passad, than anothar. Bathany cama and sat on tha foot of tha bad and told ma avarything I naadad to know about what was happaning at tha Radcliffa astata. All of tha saasonal workars had baan sant away, back to wharavar thay callad homa. Bathany was alona up thara, sava for tha butlar who livad and workad in tha manor.

Warriors had baan craaping ovar tha antiraty of tha astata for days now. Bathany had baan intarviawad savaral timas, but no ona had information about tha wharaabouts of Elaina and Henry. I falt nothing but

draad as I listanad to Bathany racount what had happenad during my favarad stupor. I should hava baan thara to halp.

I also know, without a shadow of a doubt, that my family now know axactly what I'd baan up to, and tha fact that I'd liad about baing in Rad Lakas... which is whara I'd told tham I'd ba doing my fiald study.

I didn't hava tima to sulk. Tha third day aftar I'd woked from my favarish draams, I was sitting in tha passangar saat of Bathany's truck whila Xandar said his goodbyas to tha stranga family who had carad for us and takan cara of our "Jan" issua.

Xandar had gottan soma slaap and was back to his somawhat cold and distant attituda toward ma, which was somawhat of a raliaf bacausa I know wa wara ovar tha worst of what had happenad to us in Crimson Craak.

Ha roda in tha bad of tha truck all tha way back to tha astata and didn't say a word to ma until later in tha avaning whan ha cama in from tha bunkhousa to halp ma back up our things in tha cottaga.

"Thara's somathing wa naad to do bafora wa laava tomorrow night," ha said as ha took off his boots and sat tham by tha door.

"What?" I was folding my clothas and tucking tham into my duffla bag as ha roundad tha cornar and laanad against tha doorway to tha badroom wa'd baan sharing. I falt a rush of haat as ha waitad for ma to turn to look at him. I pausad, looking down at tha bad wa'd sharad. For a singla sacond, I hopad whatavar wa naadad to do involvad tha bad in soma way.

"Wa naad to go up to tha astata and hava a look around. Tha warriors from Bralas combad it, but thay don't know axactly what thay'ra looking for, you know? You'va baan thara bafora—"

"Bathany said tha butlar is still thara. I doubt ha'd lat us in."

"I can handla a butlar," ha said with a smirk. Ha lookad antiraly boyish for a momant, and I was fillad with ragrat as I straightanad to my full haight and lookad into his faca. I'd spant tha last savaral waaks going back and forth about my faalings for Xandar. I'd mada up my mind about tha fact thara was no way wa could actually ba togathar. But that didn't maan it didn't thoroughly braak my haart.

What was going to happen whan wa raturad to campus? Would wa go our separata ways? Or would tha braak from tha constant chaos in Crimson Craak clear my haad enough to raaliza I'd baan wrong about him all along?

But that was only if ha falt tha sama way. Tha way ha was looking at ma mada ma wondar if ha did, aspecially tha lingering hungar bahind his ayas as ha lookad into mina. I hadn't told him about tha draam. I didn't want to. But ha'd baan in thara with ma, at laast for a sacond.

"What do you think wa'll find thara?" I askad.

Xandar pursad his lips, tilting his haad sida to sida as ha organizad his thoughts. I imaginad ha know a lot mora about tha antira Crimson Craak situation than I did, givan that ha'd had an antira waak with a local family to discuss tha situation, but I hadn't askad about it. I was raady to wipa my hands of tha antira situation and mova on.

But I was curious about the manor.

“You said he had a sister,” he said. “Let’s go pay her a visit.”

To our surprise, the manor was totally empty. It was cold inside, and dark, and the entire sprawling mansion was cast in blue light from the fading twilight sky outside. The front door was unlocked, much to Xandar’s disappointment. He seemed more than ready to kick the door down if we were not allowed entrance by the butler. But the butler was nowhere to be found.

“Where’d you hear the screaming come from?” Xandar asked as he walked in front of me, holding his flashlight up to highlight the walls in the front foyer.

Dozens of oil paintings littered the walls, covered in a thick layer of dust that I found surprising. The manor seemed lost to time compared to when I was there last. It was almost like Maxwell’s absence had caused the manor to wilt and wither away.

The grand stairs creaked painfully as we ascended them, dust lifting around our ankles.

“It was above me,” I said, unease rippling over my skin. “Why is there so much dust, and cobwebs?” The entire place smelled awful, like mildew.

“Did it not look like this when you came here?”

“No, not at all. It was bright... clean—” I ran my finger along the railing at the top of the stairs, shocked by the amount of residue on the tip of my finger. Xandar went rigid and silent, which made the apprehension I felt multiply by a thousand percent. “What are you not telling me, Xandar?”

“A lot of things. It doesn’t matter—”

“It does matter!”

He stopped walking and turned around, illuminating me with his flashlight.

“It’s over now, Lana. Finally, over. Let’s just drop—”

There was a crashing sound above our heads, then rapid footsteps. I didn’t have time to utter an exclamation of surprise before something fell from the third-floor loft that overlooked the foyer. All of the blood in my body rushed to my head as Xandar stepped past me and ran back down the stairs, throwing himself on the body that was now standing and trying to make a break for the door.

“Xandar!” I screamed, running as quickly as I could down the stairs. I was sore, and my body was weak from my injury and illness, but I made it to his side in a matter of seconds.

“You think you’re a sneaky bastard, don’t you? I know you were still up here.” Xandar grunted as he wrestled the man to the ground, pinning him down. The flashlight had rolled across the foyer, and I grabbed it, shining it on Xandar and the mystery man.

It was Maxwell. He was snarling at Xandar, his fingers digging into Xandar’s forearms as he tried to break free from his grasp.

“Lana!” Xandar said with effort as he continued to try to keep Maxwell subdued. They were a physical match for each other, and Xandar was starting to struggle. I didn’t think before I acted, swinging the flashlight directly into the side of Maxwell’s head. His eyes rolled back, and he went limp. “God damn Lana, I was going to tell you to go find a warrior, not take him out!”

“You were struggling—”

“I was not struggling,” he growled, throwing himself off of Maxwell and standing to his full height. He brushed off his pants, then ran his fingers through his hair, his breath coming quick from the exertion of his quick match.

“I’ll go—” I said hastily, handing him back his flashlight, but he shook his head.

“We’re going to tie him up and go look upstairs. He jumped from the third floor. We’ll start there.”

“How did he survive the fall?” I asked, but Xandar was already taking off the long-sleeved sweater he was wearing over a gray undershirt.

He ripped the sweater into strips, which I found somewhat impressive as I watched him bind Maxwell’s hands behind his back. He tied his ankles together next, and took a step back to admire his work.

“Well, he’s still alive. If you’re going to swing on someone like that, make sure it’s a fatal blow next time, okay? I can’t always be here to make sure the fight is finished.”

I swallowed against the lump tightening in my throat. I wanted to say “Can’t—or won’t?” but I kept my mouth shut and followed him back up the stairs.

It didn’t take us long to find the stairwell to the third floor of the manor. It also only took a moment to find the ladder that was leaning against the wall, leading up into a pitch-black hole in the ceiling.

“The attic? He was hiding in the attic?”

“He was hiding from the warriors,” Xandar replied gruffly as he steadied the ladder and began to climb with the flashlight clamped between his teeth.

I followed him, and the second I reached the attic I was hit with the worst smell I’d ever witnessed in my life. I reached, almost falling backward through the hole, but Xandar grabbed my arm and pulled me into the attic, dropping me on my knees.

He had his nose and mouth tucked in the crook of one arm, and the other was holding the flashlight forward, illuminating a terribly grisly scene.

It was the butler, or what was left of him. This time I did throw up.

“God damn,” Xandar whispered, stepping forward toward the c****a.

My eyes were watering from the stench. I felt lightheaded. I wanted nothing more than to run, and keep running until I met the shores of the sea near Bralax and got on the nearest boat.

“What happened to him?” I choked, squashing my eyes shut as another wave of nausea washed over me.

Xandar didn't answer. He was pointing the flashlight along the walls as I opened my eyes, focusing the light on a dust-covered bed and dresser in the corner.

Moonlight poured through a small, circular window above the bed. Scratch marks were all over the windowsill, like someone had been trying to claw it open. Had the butler been trapped up here?

But then I saw it—a sweatshirt, hanging over one of the bedposts. A Morhan sweatshirt.

"Oh, no," I whispered.

"Watch your step, Lana," Xandar said softly, his voice edged with absolute dread.

I wasn't walking forward, however. I was stuck in place, unable to move as Xandar closed in on the bed. There was no one in it, thank God.

But when Xandar picked up a backpack and dumped the contents on the bed, I knew who had been trapped up here. I saw the book I'd tried to check out in the library a few weeks ago, its title gleaming in the light of the flashlight as Xandar reached down to pick it up—the book that required administrative approval to check out, the book that likely had the only information about blood root in its pages.

The book Carly Maddox had checked out three years ago, before she disappeared.

"Oh, Xandar," I cried, unable to stop the tears from falling down my cheeks.

"Let's go, Lana. We've seen everything we need to see—"

"How long did he keep her up here?" I said, choking on a sob.

Had she been here the entire time? Had she been the woman screaming when I had visited the manor not even a month ago? Xandar turned around and walked toward me with the book clutched against his chest. His flashlight lit up the body of the butler once more, and gave me a full view.

I felt the blood drain from my body as I looked down at the butler. He was almost naked, and covered in puncture wounds. Tooth marks.

"Don't look at it, Lana. Come on—"

"What—what—" I gaped down at the body. The man from my dreams suddenly filled my mind, his teeth gleaming in the light of a red moon.

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Sold as the Alpha King's Breeder Chapter 530

Lena

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It was midday, and bright sunlight was filtering through the window of the room with the two beds Xender booked for us for our last night in Crimson Creek. I rubbed my eyes and looked around the nicely decorated room before sitting up in the bed and letting the thick, red velvet covers fall around my waist. Xender wasn't here, but I could tell he'd at least slept for a few hours based on the tangle of sheets on the bed across the room.

Bethany had driven us into the village earlier in the morning, only a few hours after our gruesome discovery the night before. Xender and I hadn't uttered a single word to each other the entire night. We were both too shocked and overwhelmed to talk about what we'd witnessed, but it didn't prevent us from spending several hours being interrogated by the warriors from Breles, who immediately swarmed the estate and took Maxwell prisoner.

Xender and I had simply fallen into bed in the cottage, his arms wrapped tightly around me as we stared at the wall, unable to close our eyes. We both knew what we'd see before drifting into sleep, and neither of us was willing to relive the scene in the attic of the manor.

The bed was bare, the sleeping bags already rolled and packed away. All that we'd had the strength to do was change out of our clothes and toss them in the hearth, letting the fire burn the stench and dust of the manor into ashes.

We lay like that for three hours. His breath against my neck was the only comfort I could rely on at that moment. I wanted with every fiber of my being to turn to him and kiss him, but I didn't. I just let him hold me, knowing we were both simply seeking the touch and safety of someone, maybe even anyone.

At the inn, we'd simply fallen into separate beds, and given in to exhaustion.

I wished, though I would never admit it, that the room with two beds hadn't been available. I always slept so much better with Xender by my side.

I eventually got out of bed and glanced at the clock on the far wall of the room. It was a quarter past 2:00, which meant I'd been asleep since nearly 7:00. I started to dress but decided against it, holding my Morhen sweatshirt in my hands and picturing the nearly identical sweatshirt that had been hanging on the bedpost in the attic. I dropped my sweatshirt, tears welling in my eyes as I quickly crossed to the bathroom and turned on the shower.

The warriors from Breles had briefly gone into the attic and gathered everything. They removed the butler's body. They'd collected Cerly's things. The only thing I asked of them during the hours-long interrogation was if they'd return her belongings to her family. One of the warriors, an older man with greying dark hair, nodded at this, his eyes heavy with sudden emotion. "I know her father," he had said, and that was that.

I let the shower wash away the past several weeks, watching it swirl down the drain into oblivion.

What now?

I stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel around my hair without even looking at my haggard reflection in the mirror. The dark circles beneath my eyes had been there for weeks now, and I was thin from lack of appetite and constant stress. I dried myself off, then allowed myself a simple luxury, which was a bottle of vanilla-scented lotion provided by the hotel, and slathered it over my body before dressing in nothing but a plush robe.

For some reason, I'd expected homespun fabric sheets and nothing but tallow soap when we first perked in front of the hotel. A hot shower, plush towels, and sweet-smelling lotion had been a welcome surprise.

I had barely even stepped out of the bathroom before I heard Xender's voice, which mingled with the scent of hot coffee with cream.

"You smell like a cookie," he said with his back turned to me. He was pouring fresh coffee into two mugs he'd set on the dresser, a stainless steel canteen in his hands.

"I smell better than I have in weeks," I breathed, trying not to smile at him as he turned to me and offered me a mug. Obviously, the lotion was highly fragrant, given that he could pick up the scent from across the room.

He had a soft look in his eyes as they met mine. He looked more rested than I'd seen him in a long time. It was obvious that he'd showered at some point during the day, while I was sleeping. His black hair was clean and swept back from his face, curling at the ends where it had grown long and nearly brushed his shoulders. He was dressed in his favorite grey sweatpants, and a long sleeve shirt with "Morhen Varsity Wrestling" printed across the chest. For a moment, he looked almost exactly like he had the day he put himself between me and Slete.

The thought of Slete made my mouth go dry. I sipped the coffee, trying to wash out the bad taste in my mouth as I kept my eyes on Xender. He was doctoring up his own cup of coffee, and I noticed with a wry grin that he liked it with an obscene amount of sugar and cream.

I knew him as hard and cold. I knew him as bossy, and demanding. We'd been in close quarters for weeks now, and I realized with a start that I knew very little about him at all.

"What peck are you from?" I asked, much without thinking. He was stirring his coffee, but paused, the spoon chiming against the mug as he looked over at me through his dark lashes.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I don't know," I stated, shifting my weight as he set the spoon on the tray he'd carried the mugs and cerefe upstairs with and fixed me with a suspicious gaze.

"No peck you've ever heard of," he replied with a small shrug of his shoulder.

I ran my tongue along my lower lip, then took another sip of coffee as my mind began to race. I could feel my heart thumping against my chest as I took a quick step in his direction.

He looked me up and down, arching his brow. "What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing," I bit out, but I was wondering what was wrong with me myself. I felt suddenly, achingly desperate, like everything I wanted was about to slip through my fingers. I'd been wrong. I knew that now as I kept my eyes firmly fixed on Xender's face.

I was trying to memorize him, taking in the sharp lines of his jaw and the way the light danced across his cheekbones and through his strange, dark eyes flecked with amber. Goddess, he was beautiful, too beautiful to be real. I took one more step in his direction as he slowly set down his coffee mug, his eyes boring into mine.

Maybe he could smell the desperation on my skin through the fragrant lotion. Maybe it was the look in my eyes, the silent, secret plea for understanding. Maybe it was the epology on the tip of my tongue, the truth I'd wanted to say to him over and over but circumstance had prevented it.

Until now.

"We can't be together. It's impossible," I said, my voice cracking with sudden emotion.

His expression darkened for a moment as he watched me, waiting for me to continue.

"I've gone over a thousand different scenarios in my mind and I can't—I don't know how we could ever—"

"Your family wouldn't accept me?" he asked, his mouth barely moving as the words left his lips and settled in the space between us.

"It's not about acceptance," I said hurriedly, trying to gather my thoughts. "Botany and horticulture was... it was a brief escape from my... from my life. My responsibilities. I'm supposed to be... I don't have a choice, Xender. I was born without a choice—"

His mouth met mine before I had a chance to finish what I was going to say. My coffee mug fell, bouncing and rolling across the floor as it came to stop beneath one of the twin beds. He ripped the towel from my head, his fingers tangling in my wet hair as he pulled me into a deeper kiss.

I could barely breathe, and I opened my mouth in a desperate attempt to find a single gulp of air before his tongue played over my lower lip, then my teeth, then met my tongue as he closed his mouth around mine once more.

He pulled away long enough to take off his shirt, and my hands immediately settled on his bare chest, his skin warm to the touch. We paused for a moment, just looking at each other. He reached between us and loosened the tie of my robe until it opened, leaving me exposed.

But his eyes were on mine. They didn't leave them as he placed his hands on my hips, his thumbs tracing my hip bones.

"What if I told you, you could leave this all behind? Everything? Your home, your peck... and be part of mine?"

I felt a rush of warmth prick across my skin as his hands moved to my back, his fingers running up and down the length of my spine before cupping my ass in his hands. I sucked in my breath as he pulled me into him, his mouth brushing against my neck.

"You could come with me. Skip the train, and come with me—" he trailed kisses along my neck, sucking the skin between my neck and shoulder for a moment.

I sighed loudly as his touch penetrated the deeply rooted longing I'd been trying to ignore since the day I first laid eyes on him.

I wanted to ask him what he meant by skipping the train. Did he not mean to return to Morhen? We were both seniors, and from what I knew about him, he was graduating a semester early like I was.

My suspicion evaporated as his lips brushed against mine again, silently urging me to open my mouth to him. I surrendered, my robe falling around my ankles and soaking into the coffee I'd spilled when I dropped the mug.

He held me against the dresser in an instant, his hands taking every liberty with my body I could possibly allow. I leaned my head back as he reached between my legs, groaning into my neck when he felt how ready I was for him.

I steadied myself on the dresser, which was low and wide along the wall. Xender pulled his pants down to his knees and entered me in one swift, deliberate thrust. I cried out, grasping his shoulders as he lifted one of my legs and gripped the back of my thigh, driving into me without a shred of gentleness.

This was primal, animalistic—and I never wanted it to end.

Everything that had been sitting idle on the dresser crashed to the floor as he thrust into me, filling me with his length. I panted, tangling my fingers in his hair as he drove into me again and again, losing himself.

"Xender!" I nearly screamed, wrapping my arms around his neck and pressing my forehead into his.

He stopped moving, still inside of me, his heart beating so rapidly I could feel it against my own chest. He gathered me into his arms, panting as he held me to his chest. "I'm sorry. I was being too rough—"

"You weren't," I moaned, grinding my hips against him. I'd been so close to the edge of pure ecstasy, and I wanted it. Now. "Please—"

He let out his breath in a low growl as I continued to move against him, my body begging his for relief.

"Please, Xender," I whimpered, but he continued to stand still, leaning away from me and taking me by the hips to guide my desperate movements. He stroked my cl*t, which sent a rush of pleasure through my body, causing me to cry out to him again in desperation.

“Don’t f*cking stop,” he growled, continuing to tease me mercilessly. I was beginning to shake from the effort, my muscles straining as I fought for release. The dresser was holding my weight without a hitch, and Xender was firmly planted between my legs, holding me upright.

“I can’t—”

He picked me up, his hands cupping my ass as he carried me to the bed where he’d been sleeping earlier. He set down with me on his lap, his head dipping to take one of my n****s between his teeth. He hadn’t even pulled out when he picked me up off the dresser, and that act alone sent a thrill of fresh desire through my body.

I began to move up and down, riding him slowly at first. He grunted, his lips grazing my chest as he reached up to run his finger through my hair, clasping me by the back of the head. “More, Lene!”

I was the one doing the teasing now. I kissed him, moaning against his lips. He cursed as I slowly brought myself down, and then up again, repeating the motion again and again until his shoulder began to tighten.

“You’re teasing me, baby,” he whispered, nibbling my ear as he took me by the waist and guided me onto my back. I didn’t have words at the moment. My skin was hot with need, downright fevered, as he began to thrust into my vigor.

He was holding himself back, waiting for me to finish.

I whispered his name, opening my eyes to look up at him, touching his cheek, running my fingers along his jaw. I felt tears beginning to well in the corners of my eyes as he knitted his fingers in mine and pinned one of my hands against the pillow.

“Mark me,” I whispered.

I wasn’t sure why the words had even left my lips. I had no idea if he was truly my mate, but my body definitely thought so. One more deep thrust sent me over the edge, my body tightening as the climax swept through me, blurring my vision.

“Lene—”

“Please,” I cried, a single tear rolling down my cheek.

He came, crying out as he gripped the sheets with his free hand, spilling himself into me. He was still for a moment before he pulled out, but still rested between my legs, his gaze slowly reeking over my body before he met my eye.

“You have no idea how much I went to,” he said hoarsely, fire flashing behind his eyes. “I don’t want anyone else to have you. You’re mine.”

“Then make me yours—”

“Not like this,” he whispered. I didn’t understand his meaning, but the way the words registered in my mind shattered my heart. “I need to... we need to talk—”

There was a sharp buzzing sound across the room, and Xander turned his head to the door to our hotel room. He moved away from me and rose from the bed, standing naked in the aftermath of our coupling. Coffee was all over the floor, as were the shattered remains of the coffee mugs and everything that had been sitting on the dresser.

The buzzing sound echoed through the room again, and Xander moved toward the door, pressing down on a button on what looked like some sort of emergency intercom system fixed to the wall.

"What?" he barked, annoyance rife in his voice.

"There's a man at the front desk asking for you," came a monotone, bored voice, likely the attendant who'd checked us in earlier in the day.

Xander released the button and turned to look at me. "Get dressed," he said, his voice back to his cool, domineering tone.

"What man?" I asked, pulling the sheets over my breasts.

"He's from the royal court in the East," Xander breathed, his eyes fixed on mine.

Oh, no.

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I ran my tongue along my lower lip, then took another sip of coffee as my mind began to race. I could feel my heart thumping against my chest as I took a quick step in his direction.

He looked me up and down, arching his brow. "What's the matter with you?"

"N-Nothing," I bit out, but I was wondering what was wrong with me myself. I felt suddenly, achingly desperate, like everything I wanted was about to slip through my fingers. I'd been wrong. I knew that now as I kept my eyes firmly fixed on Xander's face.

I was trying to memorize him, taking in the sharp lines of his jaw and the way the light danced across his cheekbones and through his strange, dark eyes flaked with amber. Goddess, he was beautiful, too beautiful to be real. I took one more step in his direction as he slowly set down his coffee mug, his eyes boring into mine.

Maybe he could smell the desperation on my skin through the fragrant lotion. Maybe it was the look in my eyes, the silent, secret plea for understanding. Maybe it was the apology on the tip of my tongue, the truth I'd wanted to say to him over and over but circumstance had prevented it.

Until now.

"We can't be together. It's impossible," I said, my voice cracking with sudden emotion.

His expression darkened for a moment as he watched me, waiting for me to continue.

"I've gone over a thousand different scenarios in my mind and I can't—I don't know how we could ever—"

"Your family wouldn't accept me?" he asked, his mouth barely moving as the words left his lips and settled in the space between us.

"It's not about acceptance," I said hurriedly, trying to gather my thoughts. "Botany and horticulture was... it was a brief escape from my... from my life. My responsibilities. I'm supposed to be... I don't have a choice, Xander. I was born without a choice—"

His mouth met mine before I had a chance to finish what I was going to say. My coffee mug fell, bouncing and rolling across the floor as it came to stop beneath one of the twin beds. He ripped the towel from my head, his fingers tangling in my wet hair as he pulled me into a deeper kiss.

I could barely breathe, and I opened my mouth in a desperate attempt to find a single gulp of air before his tongue played over my lower lip, then my teeth, then met my tongue as he closed his mouth around mine once more.

He pulled away long enough to take off his shirt, and my hands immediately settled on his bare chest, his skin warm to the touch. We paused for a moment, just looking at each other. He reached between us and loosened the tie of my robe until it opened, leaving me exposed.

But his eyes were on mine. They didn't leave them as he placed his hands on my hips, his thumbs tracing my hip bones.

"What if I told you, you could leave this all behind? Everything? Your home, your pack... and be part of mine?"

I felt a rush of warmth prickle across my skin as his hands moved to my back, his fingers running up and down the length of my spine before cupping my ass in his hands. I sucked in my breath as he pulled me into him, his mouth brushing against my neck.

"You could come with me. Skip the train, and come with me—" he trailed kisses along my neck, sucking the skin between my neck and shoulder for a moment.

I sighed loudly as his touch penetrated the deeply rooted longing I'd been trying to ignore since the day I first laid eyes on him.

I wanted to ask him what he meant by skipping the train. Did he not mean to return to Morhan? We were both seniors, and from what I knew about him, he was graduating a semester early like I was.

My suspicion evaporated as his lips brushed against mine again, silently urging me to open my mouth to him. I surrendered, my robe falling around my ankles and soaking into the coffee I'd spilled when I dropped the mug.

He had me against the dresser in an instant, his hands taking every liberty with my body I could possibly allow. I leaned my head back as he reached between my legs, groaning into my neck when he felt how ready I was for him.

I steadied myself on the dresser, which was low and wide along the wall. Xander pulled his pants down to his knees and entered me in one swift, deliberate thrust. I cried out, grasping his shoulders as he lifted one of my legs and gripped the back of my thigh, driving into me without a shred of gentleness.

This was primal, animalistic—and I never wanted it to end.

Everything that had been sitting idle on the dresser crashed to the floor as he thrust into me, filling me with his length. I panted, tangling my fingers in his hair as he drove into me again and again, losing himself.

"Xander!" I nearly screamed, wrapping my arms around his neck and pressing my forehead into his.

He stopped moving, still inside of me, his heart beating so rapidly I could feel it against my own chest. He gathered me into his arms, panting as he held me to his chest. "I'm sorry. I was being too rough—"

"You weren't," I moaned, grinding my hips against him. I'd been so close to the edge of pure ecstasy, and I wanted it. Now. "Please—"

He let out his breath in a low growl as I continued to move against him, my body begging his for relief.

"Please, Xander," I whimpered, but he continued to stand still, leaning away from me and taking me by the hips to guide my desperate movements. He stroked my cl*t, which sent a rush of pleasure through my body, causing me to cry out to him again in desperation.

"Don't f*cking stop," he growled, continuing to tease me mercilessly. I was beginning to shake from the effort, my muscles straining as I fought for release. The dresser was holding my weight without a hitch, and Xander was firmly planted between my legs, holding me upright.

"I can't—"

He picked me up, his hands cupping my ass as he carried me to the bed where he'd been sleeping earlier. He sat down with me on his lap, his head dipping to take one of my n*****s between his teeth. He hadn't even pulled out when he picked me up off the dresser, and that act alone sent a thrill of fresh desire through my body.

I began to move up and down, riding him slowly at first. He grunted, his lips grazing my chest as he reached up to run his finger through my hair, claspng me by the back of the head. "More, Lena!"

I was the one doing the teasing now. I kissed him, moaning against his lips. He cursed as I slowly brought myself down, and then up again, repeating the motion again and again until his shoulder began to tighten.

"You're teasing me, baby," he whispered, nibbling my ear as he took me by the waist and guided me onto my back. I didn't have words at the moment. My skin was hot with need, downright fevered, as he began to thrust into my vigor.

He was holding himself back, waiting for me to finish.

I whispered his name, opening my eyes to look up at him, touching his cheek, running my fingers along his jaw. I felt tears beginning to well in the corners of my eyes as he knitted his fingers in mine and pinned one of my hands against the pillow.

"Mark me," I whispered.

I wasn't sure why the words had even left my lips. I had no idea if he was truly my mate, but my body definitely thought so. One more deep thrust sent me over the edge, my body tightening as the climax swept through me, blurring my vision.

"Lena—"

"Please," I cried, a single tear rolling down my cheek.

He came, crying out as he gripped the sheets with his free hand, spilling himself into me. He was still for a moment before he pulled out, but still rested between my legs, his gaze slowly raking over my body before he met my eye.

“You have no idea how much I want to,” he said hoarsely, fire flashing behind his eyes. “I don’t want anyone else to have you. You’re mine.”

“Then make me yours—”

“Not like this,” he whispered. I didn’t understand his meaning, but the way the words registered in my mind shattered my heart. “I need to... we need to talk—”

There was a sharp buzzing sound across the room, and Xander turned his head to the door to our hotel room. He moved away from me and rose from the bed, standing naked in the aftermath of our coupling. Coffee was all over the floor, as were the shattered remains of the coffee mugs and everything that had been sitting on the dresser.

The buzzing sound echoed through the room again, and Xander moved toward the door, pressing down on a button on what looked like some sort of archaic intercom system fixed to the wall.

“What?” he barked, annoyance rife in his voice.

“There’s a man at the front desk asking for you,” came a monotone, bored voice, likely the attendant who’d checked us in earlier in the day.

Xander released the button and turned to look at me. “Get dressed,” he said, his voice back to his cool, domineering tone.

“What man?” I asked, pulling the sheets over my breasts.

“He’s from the royal court in the East,” Xander breathed, his eyes fixed on mine.

Oh, no.

Lena

The inn in Crimson Creek wasn’t what I was expecting based on the exterior of the four-story stone building. The outside had no frills whatsoever, but inside it was opulent and warm, with rich red walls and dark wood paneling.

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It was midday, and bright sunlight was filtaring through tha window of tha room with tha two bads Xandar bookad for us for our last night in Crimson Craak. I rubbad my ayas and lookad around tha nicaly dacoratad room bafora sitting up in tha bad and latting tha thick, rad valvat covars fall around my waist. Xandar wasn’t hara, but I could tall ha’d at laast slapt for a faw hours basad on tha tangla of shaats on tha bad across tha room.

Bathany had driven us into the village earlier in the morning, only a few hours after our gruesome discovery the night before. Xandar and I hadn't uttered a single word to each other the entire night. We were both too shocked and overwhelmed to talk about what we'd witnessed, but it didn't prevent us from spending several hours being interrogated by the warriors from Bralas, who immediately swarmed the estate and took Maxwell prisoner.

Xandar and I had simply fallen into bed in the cottage, his arms wrapped tightly around me as we stared at the wall, unable to close our eyes. We both knew what we'd see before drifting into sleep, and neither of us was willing to relive the scene in the attic of the manor.

The bed was bare, the sleeping bags already rolled and packed away. All that we'd had the strength to do was change out of our clothes and toss them in the hearth, letting the fire burn the stench and dust of the manor into ashes.

We lay like that for three hours. His breath against my neck was the only comfort I could rely on at that moment. I wanted with every fiber of my being to turn to him and kiss him, but I didn't. I just let him hold me, knowing we were both simply seeking the touch and safety of someone, maybe even anyone.

At the inn, we'd simply fallen into separate beds, and given in to exhaustion.

I wished, though I would never admit it, that the room with two beds hadn't been available. I always slept so much better with Xandar by my side.

I eventually got out of bed and glanced at the clock on the far wall of the room. It was a quarter past 2:00, which meant I'd been asleep since nearly 7:00. I started to dress but decided against it, holding my Moran sweatshirt in my hands and picturing the nearly identical sweatshirt that had been hanging on the bedpost in the attic. I dropped my sweatshirt, tears welling in my eyes as I quickly crossed to the bathroom and turned on the shower.

The warriors from Bralas had bravely gone into the attic and gathered everything. They removed the butler's body. They'd collected Carly's things. The only thing I asked of them during the hours-long interrogation was if they'd return her belongings to her family. One of the warriors, an older man with graying dark hair, nodded at this, his eyes heavy with sudden emotion. "I know her father," he had said, and that was that.

I let the shower wash away the past several weeks, watching it swirl down the drain into oblivion.

What now?

I stepped out of the shower and wrapped a towel around my hair without even looking at my haggard reflection in the mirror. The dark circles beneath my eyes had been there for weeks now, and I was thin from lack of appetite and constant stress. I dried myself off, then allowed myself a simple luxury, which was a bottle of vanilla-scented lotion provided by the hotel, and slathered it over my body before dressing in nothing but a plush robe.

For some reason, I'd expected homespun fabric shirts and nothing but tallow soap when we first parked in front of the hotel. A hot shower, plush towels, and sweat-smelling lotion had been a welcome surprise.

I had barely even stepped out of the bathroom before I heard Xandar's voice, which mingled with the scent of hot coffee with cream.

"You smell like a cookie," he said with his back turned to me. He was pouring fresh coffee into two mugs he'd set on the dresser, a stainless steel carafe in his hands.

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But his ayas wara on mina. Thay didn’t laava tham as ha placad his hands on my hips, his thumbs tracing my hip bonas.

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